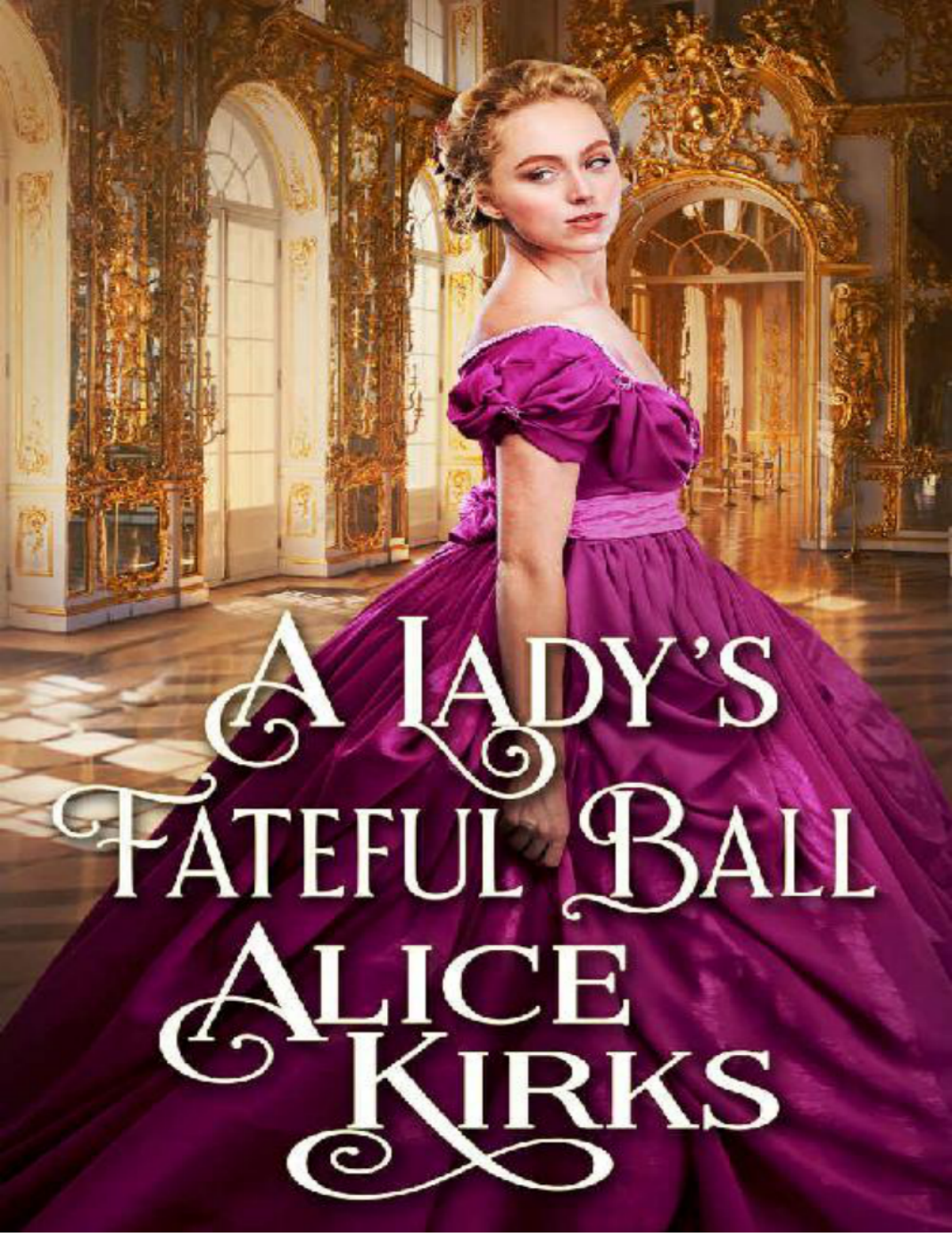

A Lady's
Fateful Ball
Alice
Kirks

A Lady's Fateful Ball

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

ALICE KIRKS

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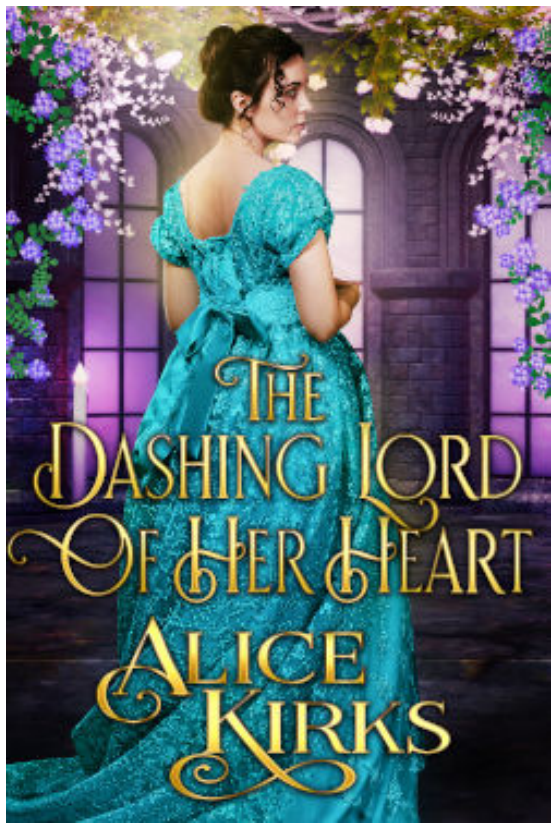
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A Lady's Fateful Ball

Introduction

Lady Tess Oakley is a fiercely independent spirit with no desire to ever get married. Unfortunately, her parents have other plans for her and do all they can to betroth her to a man she absolutely detests. Desperate as she is, Tess is determined to do everything in her power to escape a loveless engagement- even entering a fake courtship with a gentleman who shares the same detestation for marriage. Not long after this decision, her heart will betray her by starting to beat for the handsome stranger, making this arrangement more complicated than she ever expected. Could a false engagement that started as a rescue plan lead to a deeply liberating love and the salvation she has always looked for? Will Tess manage to get away from a doomed future and dare to dig into what her heart truly wants?

Lord Milton Eddington, Duke of Corrington, holds a deep secret that threatens to destroy any chance he might ever have at finding his other half. Rather than pining for what he cannot have, he prefers to have the reputation of a rake and vows to never fall in love with a woman. His life will take an unexpected turn though, when a beautiful lady appears, suggesting an intriguing proposition that will help him maintain his independence. With the passing of time, Milton realises that he is starting to fall for her ethereal existence, but the fears of the past are obstructing his feelings from fully flourishing. Will Milton ever manage to overcome the obstacles that prevent him from

allowing love to enter his lonely heart? Or will he be condemned to a miserable future just because he is afraid of confronting the demons of his past?

While Tess and Milton's love blossoms, their special connection is threatened by inner struggles and external powers that wish to keep them apart. Things will only get worse, when Milton receives a letter that blackmails him to abandon Tess and their common future is about to irreversibly fade away. Will Tess and Milton break down the wall of thorns they have built around their hearts? Will they find the courage to fight everyone who stands against them in the name of true love?

Chapter 1

Lady Tess Oakley smiled gently at those she passed by in the hall of the grand estate. A few of the gentlemen turned in her direction, taking in the sight of her petite frame, topped by a mass of blonde hair. Her lashes fluttered over large, amber eyes as her dearest friend, Rue, came alongside her. Dressed in their finest ballgowns, they were ready for an evening of dancing, gossip, and a great deal of attention.

“Good heavens, Tess. Do you think you might leave any gentlemen for the other ladies?” Rue asked. Tess noted that there were a few men eyeing her from the corner as they ignored the dancers in the middle of the hall.

“And why do you mind? You are already engaged. There is no one here who could possibly match your dearest Lord Haverdell,” Tess remarked. She nodded in the direction of Rue’s future husband, and Rue’s eyes followed, leading her to smile broadly.

“Indeed, that is so, but there are plenty of young ladies who cannot make such a claim,” Rue said.

But Tess didn’t mind. Everyone knew that the daughter of the Earl of Daleshire was beautiful, good-natured, and energetic. However, she was also known for her independence, and there were a great number of men who sought to tame her.

And Tess had no intention of being tamed.

“Not one of these ladies needs to be worried about me,” Tess remarked, glancing around at the young women busying themselves with filling their dance cards or trying to catch the eye of this or that gentleman. Many of them were pursuing only those men their fathers and mothers demanded they seek out. Tess considered it an awful shame that they did not have their own choices.

Then again, Tess had her own struggles with her mother and father wishing she would respond to the advances of a particular gentleman. Lord Stanton had been working hard to court her, despite her best efforts to avoid him.

“You say that none of these young ladies needs to worry about you, but I have faith that, in due time, you shall find the right man,” Rue said, leading the way to the refreshments table as new sets of couples made their way out to dance the waltz..

“The only man for me is a man who seeks to leave me alone,” Tess replied.

Rue grinned, her green eyes bright as she did so. But when she shook her head in playful disapproval over Tess’s antics, one of her red curls sprung from its pin, and Tess quickly rushed to trap it back into place.

“Thank you,” Rue said, glancing around nervously to ensure that she had not been seen. Tess ensured that Rue was covered, with herself on one side and the bright, white wall behind her.

Tess’s mother was off in the corner, already gossiping with her friends. She had reminded Tess earlier in the evening to be on her best behaviour, to make herself demure for the sake of the gentlemen who would be noticing her. Particularly for the sake of Lord Stanton, who

did not appear to have arrived yet. Tess searched the crowd in order to be sure that she was not going to stumble upon him. However, he was nowhere to be seen, and that gave her a great deal of peace.

“You say that these ladies do not need to worry about you taking hold of all these gentlemen, but why not? You can see clearly that any of them would be happy to be on your arm. I am shocked that you have not had more offers of courtship,” Rue said.

“I am unbothered by what they may or may not want. You know that I have vowed to never marry. I have no intention of revisiting that decision,” Tess declared.

“So you say. But I have never heard of a woman refusing to marry. What shall you do with your life? How shall you get by?” Rue asked.

“There are a great many reluctant spinsters in society who simply remain in the homes of their mothers and fathers. If I happen to put off any number of men, my mother and father shall have no reason to suspect that it is through any effort of my own,” she said.

“They shall only arrange a marriage for you in that event,” Rue warned. “After all, they are already trying, are they not?”

“Not necessarily. Regardless, it hardly matters. I shall not marry, and that is all there is to it,” Tess said, determined to stick by her decision. She was far too wild and independent to give in to the whims of her mother and father as they sought to marry her off.

Rue simply rolled her eyes, and Tess knew that she didn’t believe Tess

would actually stay with her decision.

“You are infuriatingly stubborn,and I wish that you would listen to yourself. Honestly, if you believed half the things that come from your own mouth, I would be shocked. Nevertheless, if you insist upon all of this nonsense, I shall support you, regardless. Not because I expect you to follow through on your nonsensical utterances, but because I know that, in time, someone shall change your mind,” Rue said.

“You may believe what you wish, my dear, but I should never like to be tied in marriage. You know me well enough to know how desperately I hate to be restricted,” Tess reasoned.

“Well, I am quite the opposite. I cannot imagine missing the opportunity to marry my darling Lord Haverdell. I trust that he would never force me to be the sort of half-servant that many women have to becomeare subjected to,” Rue said.

“And I am happy for you. Just because I hate the idea of marriage for myself does not mean that I would seek for you to miss such an opportunity,” Tess said.

“For that, I am thankful, but I would not care if you did. What matters to me is not your opinion but rather the life that I shall live with Lord Haverdell. You know, he is the most remarkable man I have ever met in my life. To think that he wishes to be my husband is a gift, unlike any other,” Rue said dreamily.

“And I believe that the two of you shall be very happy together. I have seen how he adores you, and it makes me happy to know that he treats you with such adoration. However, your own wishes are different from mine,” Tess said.

“You know, Lord Haverdell has a dear friend who is absolutely lovely. Many women have remarked upon his features and his charm. But he is like you. He detests any mention of marriage, and whenever it comes up, he is always quick to make a comment against it,” Rue said.

“He sounds like a very clever gentleman,” Tess said.

“That is him, just over there standing near Lord Haverdell with the dark hair and heavy brow,” Rue said, noting the group of gentlemen with glasses of brandy, laughing about something that had taken place with a friend of theirs.

Tess took in the sight of a man she knew of through his reputation. Lord Milton Eddington, Duke of Corrington, was a devilishly handsome rake with the most deep-set, striking blue eyes and a wolfish grin. Nearly any woman he laid eyes upon felt as though she was being set upon by the most alluring predator.

But Tess had also heard that much of it was rumour and nothing more. They had crossed paths only once or twice, being in the same circles at this ball or that. Never had she interacted with him directly or responded to any look he may have given her.

She did not know him well, by any means. But something about him did make her curious. If he was every bit as opposed to marriage as she, why was he constantly having young women paraded in front of him? Young ladies were brought near by their mothers and fathers. Did they not know of his reputation? Or was he so wealthy that they simply did not care?

Whatever it was, Tess could not be sure that he wasn't simply a legend to be spoken of by this or that woman who merely *wanted* to be the object of his attention. If he really was the sort of rake they all claimed, Tess was quite sure that he must enjoy his reputation and madke efforts to contribute towards it.

Then again, it was quite normal for a rake to wish to avoid marriage. After all, why would he wish to be tied to one woman when he could flirt with so many others?

She observed him across the room, and it was no shock when his eyes found hers. Tess maintained a straight back, a confident posture. She gave him the faintest hint of an amused smile as a young woman tried to get his attention in front of him. But Tess was truly in his sights, and it was no different from what had been described.

"Well, there it is then. He has spotted you. You had best make something interesting of yourself or he might look away," Rue teased.

"And you think I mind where his eyes fall? I told you, I have no interest," Tess replied.

"There is not a woman in this room who has no interest in the Duke of Corrington, and of all the lies you have told me this evening, this is the chiefest among them," Rue said.

"It is such a shame that my dearest friend does not know me better than this," Tess chided.

“And it is a shame that my dearest friend has worked so hard to believe that she is, in any way, immune to the charms of a man like him,” Rue retorted.

No matter how Tess wished to spar with Rue, her time was limited. Lord Corrington kindly made an exit from the young woman he was with and took long strides across the hall until he was beside Tess and Rue.

“Good evening, ladies,” he said, and , greeted them with a bow.

“Good evening,” they replied, curtseying in kind.

“Lady Tennant, I believe that your betrothed is rather bored over by the refreshments. I fear that he must not have seen you arrive,” Lord Corrington said to Rue.

“Is that so? Goodness, I cannot imagine why my intended was not alerted to my arrival at once. After all, he has told me so many times that I brighten up the room,” Rue lilted, teasing her betrothed from afar.

“Perhaps the problem is that your dear friend here darkened it in kind,” he said, turning to Tess.

“Oh? I have the power to darken a room? What a shame that is. I must be dreadfully unfortunate,” she said.

“I believe I do have a cure for your gloom,” he said, a single brow raised in suggestion.

“And what might that be?” Tess sparred, placing a hand on her hip in firm disapproval of his charm. She had no intention of allowing him to sway her.

“A dance with the most eligible bachelor in the hall,” he replied mischievously.

Tess took in his words for a moment, aware that he was trying to be witty and that she would have to make an effort to be his match with her words.

“What I find remarkable is that I was in rather a cheerful mood before we were so disturbed. However, if I am to dance with the most eligible bachelor in the room, I suppose I must go on the hunt for Lord Bonneville, which is rather ironic as I have never been overly fond of him,” she said, managing to playfully insult Lord Corrington on two counts.

He flashed that notorious grin at her once more, as if recognising that she was something rather different from the others. Proud of her triumph, Tess waited patiently for him to speak further.

“Lady Oakley, I fear that you are every bit the cynic. Somehow, that only makes you more of an intrigue,” Lord Corrington said.

“I suppose that I would rather have a reputation as a cynic than a simpering fool,” Tess said, unconsciously glancing around at the many

young ladies begging for the attention of a variety of gentlemen.

“Yes, indeed. It is rather strange to meet a young woman without an inherent need to please whomever she finds her eyes set upon. Or is it that your eyes have not yet set upon any man?” he asked.

Tess smirked and leaned forward as if to share a secret.

“Perhaps it is that I have no intention of allowing them to do so. I am not subject to the whims and needs that plague so many. Nevertheless, I do enjoy a nice ball and the opportunity to dress in finery. It is such a shame that gatherings such as this one are used for merely the sake of matchmaking and the grounds for scandal,” she said.

For a long moment, Lord Corrington stared at Tess with some sort of admiration, she suspected, for her ability to match his own lack of desire for romance and society’s expectations. He said nothing, but Tess interpreted the look with ease. It was clear that Lord Corrington had every hope of making her swoon. After all, it was rare that he was given a challenge by any woman.

Still, even this hope that she might be conquered was tempered with the fact that Lord Corrington was the last man in London to actually want a future with Tess. To him, this was all just a game, and she knew it.

“Lady Oakley,” he began, “Forgive me for my former request, made out of arrogance, which I see does not charm you. Allow me to refine the wording of what I iwould like. I would be honoured if you would subject yourself to a dance with a gentleman as loathsome as I.”

Tess laughed heartily, appreciating his self-deprecation and how devoted he was to charming her. There was something interesting about his attempts that she couldn't ignore.

"Very well, Lord Corrington. If I must," she replied out of amusement.

"Well, I am entirely grateful. You see, I find that your gloom has actually brightened my day," he said.

Tess gave him a playful glare, letting him know that she was not going to be charmed by his efforts. If he had any real intention to gain her favour, she expected that he would have introduced himself to her mother first. No, indeed, this was a man with tenacity and a lack of commitment, which suited Tess rather well.

Lord Corrington held out his hand to her just in time for the previous dance to finish and a new one to begin. She graciously accepted and followed him out onto the dance floor, perfectly aware that this was the sort of thing that might make people talk.

But Tess didn't mind. Her greatest hope was that Lord Boyd Stanton would see this dance and know that Tess was not loyal to him, nor any other. She was a woman unburdened by notions of romance.

And that was precisely how she intended to remain.

Chapter 2

Milton could not take his eyes off Lady Oakley, but it was less about her beauty than her capacity for banter that now held his interests. There was something truly interesting about her that made her so different from all the other women in the room, and he considered that a rather fascinating challenge to understand.

He knew that Lady Oakley was the daughter of the Earl of Daleshire ,but wondered why she did not parade herself as such. She was clearly a confident woman, and she had a great depth of personality. Milton had also heard of her spirit and adventurous nature, which he was quickly coming to note as being true in every way.

The most beautiful woman in the room, Lady Oakley was often spoken of, and Milton had heard about her from others. As the music began and he bowed to begin the dance, he noted that they were being watched by envious men all around the room. But this was simply a chance for Milton to prove that even *she* could not resist his charms.

“You are a most graceful dancer,” he said, once the movements began, and they spun about with ease.

“Are you not supposed to say that to sayeverywoman with whom you dance?” Lady Oakley asked in reply.

Milton laughed, appreciating that she was still unable to be moved. He glanced over to James, who was now dancing with his betrothed, Lady Tennant, just in time for James to raise an eyebrow and smirk at him for dancing with Lady Oakley.

Being that Lady Tennant was Lady Oakley's dearest friend, Milton sensed that James was going to give him grief later in the evening. He could handle that, however. He was rather used to such treatment from friends on account of being labelled a rake and a man without a sentiment for marriage.

Little did they know that he had a reason for such feelings. His behaviour was less about a dramatic notion or childish lack of responsibility and more about doing what was right. He didn't mind being viewed as a rake, but it sometimes bothered him when people saw nothing more.

"Lady Oakley, forgive me once more. I seem to be offending you at every turn," Milton said.

"Offending? No, not at all. Rather, I am interested to know why you feel the need to treat me as you would any other woman. It may shock you to learn this, but not all women are exactly the same as one another. Indeed, many of us are actually quite different from others," she said teasingly.

"Is that so? Well, I must confess that I am embarrassed for having treated you as though that were not so. Perhaps you shall learn to understand that while not all women are the same, the vast majority of men have one thing in common," Milton said.

"And what is that?"

"I fear that we are all agonisingly foolish and know nothing at all of what women truly wish for us to say or how they desire to be treated.

You have stumbled upon one of my many great weaknesses in that I am no better than any other man in this regard," he said.

"Be that as it may, I find you rather different from the other men to whom you compare yourself," Lady Oakley said.

Milton was, once more, intrigued. He had not anticipated such an analysis from her as this.

"And what is that?"

"Your confidence, for one. I am accustomed to seeing nothing but arrogance from men such as you. However, your confidence is… well…it is somewhat adjacent to the arrogance of others," she explained.

Milton raised a brow and eyed her for a moment before bursting into laughter.

"My goodness, Lady Oakley, that is a far cry from what I am usually told. Strange that so many deem me as being excessively arrogant, and you do not see it at all?" he asked.

"I never claimed to not see it. I merely stated that it is separate from what I typically see," she replied.

Before Milton could respond, he glanced up and noted that they were being watched keenly by Lord Stanton, a man who exhibited every bit

of the arrogance Lady Oakley mentioned. He clearly disliked the idea of Milton and Lady Oakley dancing with one another, and Milton couldn't deny that it gave him a brand new amusement. After all, Lord Boyd Stanton, the future Earl of Henbridge, had never been overly friendly and had taken a particular disliking to Milton quite some time ago.

Milton responded to him by grinning in such a way that he knew would bother Lord Stanton a great deal, causing the man to sneer at him and look towards the rest of the crowd.

When Milton returned his eyes to Lady Oakley, she was looking at him with her own suspicious gaze.

"You seem to have bothered one of my suitors," she noted.

"One of your suitors? Interesting. I was not aware of the fact that you had any, nor that Lord Stanton was among them," he said.

"Indeed, he is. Although I cannot say with any great sense of confidence that he is the sort of man I would choose, were I actually to be given the choice," Lady Oakley said.

"Is that so?" Milton asked, surprised that she would say this so openly.

"It hardly matters, in truth. There are not many whom I would consent to choosing. Regardless, I understand that you are more interested in the whims of debutantes than the desires which they have to be wed," Lady Oakley noted.

Milton grinned again and subconsciously chewed on his lip as he spun her in the dance.

“You are a rather bold woman, you know,” he said.

“Am I?” she asked.

“Shockingly so,” Milton replied.

“I fear that there is little I am able to do in order to stop myself,” she said in the most charming way possible.

There was something about her that really did interest and surprise him, particularly in the way that she appeared rather confident in her own right and did not seem particularly bothered by the things the other young women cared for to such a great extent. She was clearly not here to find a husband but to truly enjoy herself.

He had not known such a woman as far as he could recall, one who was less interested in seeking a match as seeking a life. If she was anything at all like he was interpreting, she just might be the most adventurous woman he had ever known. Regardless of whether or not he was truly understanding her, Milton was enjoying her company, enjoying the wistful nature of her smile and the fact that he was able to take in her beauty without having her interpret it as a proposal of marriage.

Her ability to entertain him was different as well. She bantered mildly

about Lord Stanton, which was always a way to win Milton's favour, but she also had a keen sense of awareness of herself. She appeared to move in the dance as though utterly conscious of how she was being watched and by whom. She breezed in and out of the motions as though performing for the lords and ladies who would have loved to spurn her with gossip and rumour.

Still, she held her head high, inviting interest from many around the room and once more, Milton saw how Lord Stanton fumed at the sight of the two of them dancing with one another.

At last, however, the music began to come to an end, the fine chord of the violin vibrato'd until there was silence, instantly followed by a resounding clap as was expected.

It was always the end of a dance when a young woman invited Milton to meet her mother and father, or she hinted at hoping for another. The more forward—or rather, desperate—young ladies would even mention that their home would be available if Milton should like to visit for tea. He was accustomed to this behaviour and the fact that nearly every young woman with whom he danced would make such remarks.

"It was a pleasure dancing with you, Lady Oakley," Milton said, smiling with his mischievous grin once more and giving her an opportunity to make whatever suggestion she thought appropriate to ensure that he knew of her availability.

"And with you, Lord Corrington," she said, giving him a quick curtsy. Rather than linger and hint at her interest, Lady Oakley did the most marvellous thing.

She turned and walked away from him.

The flippant departure left only the scent of blossoms and the last glance of her charming smile before she blurred into the crowd and found her dear friend once more.

Milton was astonished and deeply impressed. He was utterly unaccustomed to such behaviour from a young woman, and it caused him far more fascination than insult. Who was this woman who was not ready to swoon before him?

“Ah, you danced with Lady Oakley, did you?” James asked, coming over to him as their dance partners met up to gossip and laugh on the other side of the room.

“I did, indeed,” Milton replied, still watching her for a moment longer. He then turned to James and tried to focus, a placid smile on his face to cover for his sudden interest in learning more about Lady Oakley.

“Hmm,” James said. “Strange.”

“What is?” Milton asked.

“I never thought you would be the sort of man to incite a rivalry. After all, everyone knows you have no interest in settling down with a young woman ,but would far rather invite the fancies of many. And yet, here you are, issuing a challenge, perhaps?” James asked.

“Whatever are you going on about? I have no awareness of what you are saying,” Milton said.

“Very well, I shall make it plain for you, Milton. You, my friend, have entered into the rather risky territory of having danced with a woman who is being courted by Lord Stanton,” James said.

Milton shrugged, unbothered by the fact.

“And what of it? It was merely a dance, and you know that,” Milton said.

“Does he? Lord Stanton is not a man to offend. You ought to have spoken with him first,” James said.

“I was hardly even aware that he was courting her. I know *of* Lady Oakley, but this was our first true interaction. Surely Lord Stanton knows this. Besides, I have a feeling that Lady Oakley is hardly going to be supportive of his effort to woo her,” Milton said.

“And why do you say that?”

Milton looked slyly at James with an eyebrow raised and shrugged.

“Oh, good heavens, did she tell you that?” James asked.

“She certainly made it clear. Anyway, it matters not. I am not afraid of Lord Stanton. Even if I were the sort of gentleman to try and woo a woman, I would not care about him. As it is, everyone knows I do not look for such things,” he said.

“But everyone knows you enjoy the attentions of women. You charm them, which is equally dangerous as wooing. Not only that, but Lord Stanton is not simply interested in her; I have heard that he intends to make a proposal rather soon,” James said.

“How do you know that?” Milton asked, not certain why it even mattered to him.

“Because I am engaged to her dearest friend, and I learn far more gossip than any self-respecting man should ever wish to hear,” James answered, cynically.

Milton laughed at that. He knew that James adored Lady Tennant and that they would be very happy together, but such a life was not for Milton. He could not bear the petulance of marriage or the whims of a shallow woman who cared for balls and gossip. Certainly, James had expressed that Lady Tennant was far more than that, that she had great depth to her, but Milton had never interacted with her long enough to see that.

He glanced back at Lady Oakley, who was already being approached by another gentleman before Lord Stanton quickly interjected. That man was of the sort that he believed himself as having ownership over others. It was rather atrocious in Milton’s eyes. He could not bear the idea of a man like that trying so hard to win the affections and loyalties of a woman only to turn around and express his lordship over her. That was precisely the sort of man he was.

Then again, Milton also detested Lord Stanton's father. That man was certainly a villain. His own personal beliefs were offensive to the very value of mankind. As a staunch opponent to the abolitionist movement, Milton could have no respect for him at all.

"Milton?" James asked, snapping him from his thoughts.

"Oh, forgive me. I was distracted," he said.

"Clearly. What has gotten into you? I scarcely ever see you so caught up in your thoughts as this. Is something bothering you?" James asked.

"Not at all," Milton said.

"I feared that I had caused you worry in my own concern regarding Lord Stanton. While I do urge you to be cautious around the man, I hope that you will not allow him to intimidate you," James said.

"I would never allow for such a thing. You ought to know me better than that," Milton replied.

Before James could say another word, a young woman paraded herself nearby, glancing at Milton with eyes surrounded by long lashes and giving him a smile that was simultaneously innocent and flirtatious. It was precisely the sort of look that so many young ladies had perfected over time, a look that gave him great interest to receive as it was enough to let him know that, while the young woman may not ever receive a proposal of marriage for him, at least he might have a

chance to win her affections for the moment, thereby proving himself irresistible to another young woman.

“Looks as though you have an admirer,” James said in a hushed tone.

“Indeed, it appears as though I do,” Milton grinned, stepping forward in his plan to speak with the young woman. Although Lady Oakley’s disinterest had made her intriguing, Milton had no intention of abandoning his nature. If he saw a lovely young woman, he would pursue her. But only for the evening.

Yes, people called him a rake and a lout; they decried his loose morals and his womanising behaviours. There were many who believed that he was simply out to corrupt, to convince young women to let go of their decent, moral natures in favour of his dashing appearance and ability to make them feel beautiful regardless of their mother’s demands that their waists be smaller or their backs straighter. All he had to do was show them that they were striking no matter what.

And it was easily done.

The vast majority of women Milton had known could certainly be considered lovely in one way or another. If a young lady had a large nose, it did not take away from hthier striking eyes. If she had a masculine chin, it did not distract him from her soft and shining curls. In all, Milton understood beauty, and he went after it.

To lock himself into the devotion of only one woman was the farthest

thing from his mind.

Chapter 3

The carriage jumped along the road as Tess looked out the window. Her mother was still in a fowl mood with her, frustrated that Tess had not made better efforts with Lord Stanton and ensuring that he maintained his interest in her. Tess tried to be reasonable with her mother, to explain why she had so little care for that man, but it certainly did not seem as though her mother was willing to listen.

“He has been making every effort to court you. You danced only once with him, although everyone knows that he intends to propose to you very soon. It would have been better had you danced twice as opposed to spurning him,” her mother said.

“I did not spurn him, Mother. I simply explained that I did not wish to appear improper by spending the whole evening with him when we are not betrothed,” Tess said, although when she had told Lord Stanton that, she had seen the look in his eye. It appeared as though he took it to be a challenge, and Tess was beginning to wonder if she had only made things worse, encouraging him to propose other sooner than he already intended.

Regardless of Lord Stanton’s plans, Tess knew that she needed to be prepared for his advances. If he was going to ask her to be his wife, she had no choice but to be ready with her refusal. Of course, this would infuriate her mother and father, but Tess could not think about that just now. She needed to think about what was best for her.

“Have you given any thought as to what might happen should he lose his interest in you? There are dozens, maybe hundreds, of young women who would be thrilled by the prospect of marrying that man,” her mother said.

“I wish him all the best in his pursuit of them. I should not be bothered in the least by his decision to carry on with another,” Tess declared.

“Good heavens, child. You are infuriating. Do you not realise that you are making a most terrible choice? Your father has worked so very hard for you to have such an opportunity as a match with a man like Lord Stanton. His father is quite influential. Furthermore, he is going to be the future Earl of Henbridge once his father has passed. Do you really wish to miss out on such a thing?” her mother asked.

“I danced with a duke this evening,” she replied quickly, as a means of expressing to her mother that she did not have to wait around for some future earl.

“Yes, you did—a duke with a reputation for inciting young women to immorality. Are you truly attempting to use that as an excuse to declare yourself free from the obligation of our hopes for you with Lord Stanton?” her mother asked, reminding Tess how weak her argument was.

“I only mean to express that if you are so set on my marriage to a man with a decent title, I do have other options. I may continue in my efforts to sway one,” Tess remarked.

“The man who already has a keen interest in you is one which so many young ladies would adore. He is considered very handsome and charming,” her mother said.

“By those who are unbothered about his father’s political affiliations,

perhaps. Lord Stanton has not spoken out in protest against his father's leanings," Tess remarked, infuriated by Lord Henbridge's defence of the use of slaves and the empire's atrocious behaviour in the colonies.

"Oh, hush. You are a young woman, Tess. You do not know anything about these political ideologies any more than I do. It is not our place to have a say in how the British empire conducts its business with other cultures," her mother said.

Tess's cheeks burned with fury at her mother's choice to remain ignorant.

"Father agrees that the use of slaves is immoral and improper," Tess retorted, invoking her father's morals if she could not depend upon her mother's.

"Very well. Your father is a man and a member of parliament. Allow him the freedom to speak out. He is still hopeful of your union with Lord Stanton, so he cannot be so opposed to Lord Henbridge that he would see your union broken," her mother said.

Tess was grieved by her father's unwillingness to stand firm in this regard. She wished, desperately, that he would understand how a union with that family would undermine the work of the abolitionists. Tess could hardly bear the fact that men and women were bought and sold for labour. She wished that her mother would understand. Furthermore, in her own selfish way, she wished that it would preclude her from having to marry a man like Lord Stanton.

No matter what her family believed, Tess was unwilling to cater to a husband like Lord Stanton. She had also seen how he behaved towards

others, and it was clear that he truly did believe that men and women ought to be ordered about. She could not be sure ,but believed that his own family may even own slaves. After all, why not? If his father was in favour of such an act, they might as well.?

“Do you truly not believe that we must speak out against something so heinous, Mother?” Tess asked, unwilling to let go of the point. This went beyond her own dread of marriage and to the very sake of human nature and dignity.

“Enough, Tess. You and I must not speak of it. Whatever Lord Henbridge believes, it does not mean that you may not be associated with their family. We should be so lucky as to have such a connection,” her mother said.

“I cannot bear the idea of marrying a man such as he, Mother,” Tess groaned, wishing that she had any say at all in the matter.

“And yet, bear it, you must. If Lord Stanton offers to marry you, I would be furious if you refused his proposal. Surely you must understand that you are a young woman of breeding and you are, therefore, expected to marry wisely. Believe me, my dear, this is the best thing for you,” her mother said again.

“How can you truly feel that way, Mother? I wish you would understand that all I have ever hoped for is to live my life free and independent of the whims of a man. Have I no value as I am? Why must I be married off? Is there really such a need for our family? There are plenty of women who remain spinsters,” Tess reasoned, unwilling to give in to the tyranny her mother bestowed upon her.

“Oh, poppycock!” her mother scoffed, waving away the concern. “I

wish that you understood even half of what you declare. You are being so deeply foolish in your insistence that you would do just as well remaining unwed. Do you know why such women are spinsters?"

"Because their mothers and fathers do not value them for marriage only?" Tess suggested.

"Hardly! It is because they are unable to find a match, Tess. You ought to be proud of the fact that you are so desired by Lord Stanton that you may have his hand. Not only him but the hand of nearly any man of your choosing," her mother said.

"And why should I not choose another? You have not even given me the chance to see if there is another option," Tess said, hoping that she might be able to delay the inevitable by jumping around and being courted by different men at different times.

"Do not pretend that you have any such intention. I shall not be manipulated by you. Your father and I agree that your match with Lord Stanton would be beneficial to both his family and to ours. This is the best choice we have, my dear. I think that, in time, you shall come to see it. Honestly, you shall be proud to be the wife of such a man. It is only going to take you a while to realise it," her mother insisted.

Tess clenched her jaw, frustrated about not being listened to. She knew that eshe could never be a match for a man like Lord Boyd Stanton, future Earl of Henbridge. He was the worst of men, in her eyes, just like his father. Still, whatever argument she tried to make on her own behalf, her mother would refuse to hear it, and that meant that Tess would have to fight very hard to maintain her independence. She would have to ensure that Lord Stanton was the one who decided she was utterly unfit for marriage and very much the sort of woman a man ought to dread.

Of course, this could potentially damage her reputation in society altogether, but Tess was hardly worried. She was utterly convinced that if anyone was deserving of her attention, she would ensure that they had it. Otherwise, she hardly minded the prattling gossip of others, the way they would sneer at her when she walked by. She would still have friends like Rue, and that was what mattered the most. Rue would never betray her. She hardly liked anyone else anyway.

“I must tell you, Tess, your marriage to Lord Stanton is sooner than you expect,” her mother said in a conspiratorial tone.

“What do you mean by that?” she asked out of dread.

“Well, you are aware that there has been talk of him proposing, of course. What you may not be aware of is that he has already spoken with your father. It is no longer a matter of if, but rather, when. The fact that he has not asked you yet means nothing at all. Once they agree on the terms of the engagement, such as a dowry and whatever else it comes down to, you shall be the betrothed of Lord Stanton,” her mother said.

“Father has already agreed to discuss terms with him? When did this happen? I thought it was all still a matter of him trying to decide if I was worth his interest. Mother, do not tease me. Has he really been working on an agreement with Father?” Tess asked.

“Of course he has, my dear. Did you really believe that he would set his interest aside? There is no reason at all that Lord Stanton ought to delay. And once he and your father agree to their terms, the wedding shall be a matter of a month or two away,” her mother reasoned.

Tess felt sick as if she was going to be nauseoueas. She had never imagined that this was so soon to take place. Why had her mother and father not told her the moment Lord Stanton left after the discussion? Did they believe that she ought to be surprised by it? That she would be happy to learn about this? It was a dreadful thing to learn, and Tess could hardly believe that she would have to suffer such a thing.

“Now, you had best be ready for when he comes to ask you. You know that a man must be flattered when he makes such a request as this. You must bat your lashes and tell him how flattered you are, what an honour it is to be thought of in such a way as to receive his proposal. Lord Stanton shall surely be thrilled by your excitement. The last thing I wish is for you to offend him by behaving as though you do not want this,” her mother said.

“But, Mother, I do not,” she said flatly.

“And yet, you shall behave as though you do. Believe me, Tess, this is the best thing for you. You shall understand in time,” she said again.

Frustrated and upset, Tess was at a loss. Tears pricked her eyes, and she found herself grieving more than she had anticipated. Rue’s words came back to her, reminding her that this was the inevitable consequence of her firm decisions against marriage. Of course, her mother and father would simply find someone for her as she had never been willing to find someone herself in the past two seasons since she had entered society.

“Lord Stanton shall be a most devoted husband, you know. I trust that he is going to do everything within his authority to treat you as if you were a queen. He certainly has enough money to do so,” her mother

said with a chuckle.

“And you and father have not done more than enough in that regard? You afford a great deal, and there is no reason that I should not simply remain with you for the time being. Why should I not be happy to continue living with my own mother and father?” she asked.

“Will you simply let go of this foolish notion that has led you to believe that you may do as you please? Do you think that I did not also have a time in my life in which I longed to marry whomever I wished or run off with a regiment soldier?” her mother asked as if there had been such a day.

“Then why did you choose to marry father?” Tess asked.

Her mother sighed calmly, and a faint smile spread over her lips.

“At first, I did not wish to. But, with time, we came to care for one another. You know that I respect your father and think very highly of him. I believe that you shall find the very same thing,” her mother said.

“But do you love him?” Tess asked.

Her mother gave her a girlish smile then and shrugged.

“Love has nothing to do with it,” she said, although Tess could read in her mother’s face that she truly had come to love him. For some

reason, that fact was enough for her mother to trust that Tess would carry the same fate. She believed that she, too, would fall in love with the man she was forced to wed.

But Tess had never thought about running away with some regiment soldier or anyone else, for that matter. She had only ever longed for the freedom to live her life and to enjoy the goodness of independence, and that was now in jeopardy.

By the time Tess and her mother arrived back at their estate, she retired to her large bedroom, with the vaulted ceilings and burgundy drapes. Was this not enough for her? Did her mother and father truly believe that she needed something more?

And was there any chance she might convince them otherwise?

Chapter 4

Milton leaned back with the glass of brandy in his hand, the fire warming him and James, who sat near him. It was an unseasonably cold morning, and he was in no mood for the chill. In his grand estate, he did not allow for the discomforts of the cold.

“A bit early in the day for that, do you not think?” James teased him, gesturing towards the brandy.

“Really? I rather thought I had shown great discretion,” Milton replied. “After all, I drank so little at the ball last evening that it seemed to me a reasonable thought that I might have a bit of brandy now.”

“I am sure that you think so, but your aunt would be appalled,” James said.

“My aunt is busy in Italy visiting that esteemed country. Well, that is what she claims, anyway. Although she is still recovering from the loss of her husband, I believe that she is there so that she might see Lord Danvers. I expect that he shall propose at once upon the end of her mourning period,” Milton said.

“And do you approve of the man?” James asked.

“I do, indeed. Even if I did not, I would never prevent her from the match. She cares for him, and he makes her happy—which is something she very much needs just now. I trust that he will take

excellent care of her, and I could never stop that," Milton said.

"Well, that is a fine thing to hear. And strange, coming from your lips. After all, you are so utterly opposed to marriage that I never dreamt you would want it for another," James said.

"I am opposed to the possibility of my own union. That means nothing for the sake of another. If my aunt—or you and Lady Tennant, for that matter—wish to be married, I would not dream of preventing the matter," he said.

"Even if you felt otherwise, I ihope you know that you could never stop my marriage," James scoffed.

"I am well aware of that," he replied.

"Anyway, I must ask you once more about your dance with Lady Oakley. You certainly seemed taken by her," James said.

"Only in as much as I am taken by any woman. Why would you say that?" Milton asked.

"Because even as you danced with that other woman twice after—what was her name again?—you still looked to Lady Oakley… repeatedly," James remarked.

Milton waved away his observation.

“The lady I was dancing with was Lady Middleton, and she was a lovely young woman with whom I could spend my time. As far as Lady Oakley, she was intriguing enough to entertain me, but nothing more,” he said.

“And what of Lady Middleton’s mother and father? Did they scold her for dancing with you?”

“Of course not. My reputation means nothing to them. I am wealthy, titled, and they believe they may tame me just as all the rest. I have been invited for tea,” Milton said, sighing reluctantly. He could not understand why he was still considered an eligible bachelor when he had made every point to prevent such a thought from others.

“So, if you were forced to spend time with Lady Middleton or Lady Oakley, with whom would you interact?” James asked.

“Preferably, neither,” Milton said, denying whatever sense within him knew the answer.

“If you had to choose,” James pressed.

Milton gave him a dry, irritated expression.

“I suppose I would choose Lady Oakley because she did not force me to speak with her mother and father,” he said.

James grinned at the answer, and Milton was certain that this had been what James was searching for.

“I am glad to hear it. You know, as she is a dear friend of my darling Lady Tennant, there are a few things about Lady Oakley which I have never spoken of to you. It is only just now that I have even thought of it,” James said.

“And what is that? You appear rather excited, which only gives me cause for concern,” Milton said.

“Yes, I am sure of that. Well, if you must know, Lady Oakley is actually rather like you in many ways,” he said.

“Is that so? And how are we similar? Does she, too, detest everything about my having to meet her mother and father?” he asked with sarcasm.

“Further than that,” James said. “Lady Oakley detests the very idea of marriage itself.”

Although he could not say why this did spark intrigue in Milton. He had never met a woman who felt that way. Learning that Lady Oakley could not abide the idea of marriage was a bit of a shock. It did explain her behaviour and the fact that she was less than impressed by him. Still, Milton found it odd to think that a young woman like her would be so similar to him in terms of her opposition to something the rest of society deemed so important.

“I can see that I have fascinated you. Tell me, do you think that you would be interested in getting to know her now that you are aware of all that you have in common?” James teased.

“Ha! You just told me that the primary thing in which we are similar is that we both dislike the thought of marriage. Why would I wish to undo that? I would not disregard her or disrespect her to the extent that she and I might be forced to form some sort of union out of our protest against unions,” Milton said, shaking his head.

“I understand that; however, I also think that it is interesting that you might bond to someone who also sees flaws in a structure which gives such comfort to all else in society,” James said.

Although Milton was unwilling to relent on his thoughts about marriage or the idea of marrying a woman at all, he did realise that this similarity must have been why he and Lady Oakley got along so well. Neither of them were trying to impress the other. They both wished only for their own independence from marriage and would not make any attempt to form a true bond.

Indeed, of all the ironies, they had bonded over just that.

“Anyway, we ought to depart,” James said, looking out the window.

“Has it warmed, do you think?” Milton asked.

“It is not so cold as you think. Besides, a brisk walk is just what we need,” James said.

“Very well. I cannot argue with that.”

They departed from the estate and made their way to Hyde Park in order that they might continue socialising after their evening of dancing the previous night. By the time they arrived, they noted that there were already many men and women who had arrived, having had the same thought as they. Milton was pleased to see a few of the young ladies with whom he had danced the evening before, but he avoided them at all cost, seeing their prying mothers nearby. Instead, he followed James, who made his way directly to Lady Tennant and her dear friend, Lady Oakley.

“Good afternoon, my dear. I am so pleased to see you,” James said in as proper a form as he was able. It was evident to Milton that James wished to embrace his intended ,but was trying to maintain propriety at all costs.

Nevertheless, he refrained from doing so, instead glancing around to ensure that he had done nothing which might embarrass Lady Tennant.

“I am pleased to see you as well, Lord Haverdell,” she replied with as much warmth underlying the formality as James had offered.

“Lady Oakley,” Milton greeted with a bow.

“Lord Corrington,” she replied with a curtsey.

“Shall we walk together?” James suggested, looking between the three. Milton understood that this was all an effort for James to walk with Lady Tennant—and perhaps an attempt to bring him closer to Lady Oakley.

But Milton would not be fooled by such a tactic. Rather, he was more than capable of understanding what his friend wanted, and he was happy to simply smile at Lady Oakley and walk with her.

The four prodded along with one another, and Milton noted that the mothers of the young women were trailing far behind, barely even aware that their daughters had taken up the path with two gentlemen. He was relieved that he would not have to go and seek permission from Lady Oakley’s mother and that he would just act as if he was following James.

But James and Lady Tennant walked ahead, leaving Milton and Lady Oakley dawdling behind, and it was an opportunity for him to at least get to know her and try to understand what sort of woman she was.

“It is nice to see you again, Lady Oakley. Strange that we should come into contact so soon after our first meeting,” Milton said.

“Indeed, it is. I believe we have crossed paths at balls in the past, but we have not interacted much. Strange, considering that our dearest friends are betrothed to one another,” she noted.

“I thought the same,” he replied. “And it is also strange as I have learned that we have a good deal in common.”

“Oh? Such as?”

“I have heard that you, as well, are rather opposed to the idea of marriage,” Milton noted.

Lady Oakley looked at him with great offence in her eyes. She clearly disliked his awareness of this part of her and the fact that he was behaving as though he knew her or understood her. He felt bad, not having anticipated that she would be bothered by this. Still, a part of him was unwilling to relent. He knew so few women who felt this way, and he wanted to understand why.

“You believe you know something about me such as this? And why, may I ask, would you believe that it is your business? Do you feel that you must somehow convince me to fall prey to your charms and let go of my independence and my affection for self-reliance?” she asked, rather fiercely.

Milton raised an eyebrow, amused by her boldness and frustration at his mentioning this point.

“On the contrary, Lady Oakley, I am intrigued because I, too, feel this way, and I have never before met a young lady who does. It is a very unique thing to come across a woman who has no desire for marriage. For the most part, I am overwhelmed by women who are eagerly seeking to stay my hand, to show me that I am wrong in my rather… ignoble ways,” he said, putting his reputation delicately.

Lady Oakley scoffed and looked straight ahead, clearly unamused by him.

“Would you deny it?” he asked, still curious as to whether or not James had told him the truth.

“I would not,” she finally admitted, keeping her head high and her dignity firm.

“Very well. In that case, perhaps we may speak openly. It was really not so difficult, now, was it?” Milton asked.

“You are rather presumptuous,” Lady Oakley grunted.

“Am I? I must say that last evening, you appeared perfectly comfortable speaking openly. You shared things which I have scarcely imagined a young woman would be willing to say aloud, particularly to a man she had only just met. Nevertheless, you did just that. You spoke openly with me. Forgive me for expecting much the same today,” Milton said.

“You are forgiven. Nevertheless, I have no desire to speak openly with you about my distaste for marriage,” Lady Oakley said.

“Certainly, Lady Oakley. As you wish,” Milton replied.

But it took only a moment before she sighed and gave in.

“Very well. You are correct. I have no desire for marriage. I never have. The idea of handing my entire life and identity over to a

gentleman is the last thing I wish to do. I understand what is expected of a woman upon her decision to marry. She is treated as only half of her former self. She is given none of the same delicacy," Lady Oakley said.

"And that is why you do not wish to marry?" Milton asked, surprised by her openness.

"That is far from the only reason, but it is usually enough to garner a bit of understanding from others who would not otherwise be willing to hear me out," she replied.

It was fascinating, meeting this woman who had her own reasons for not wanting to marry,but also for her bold demeanour. Milton wished that others would follow in her stead, speaking their minds and sharing how they felt about these particulars. It was intriguing to interact with Lady Oakley, but he thought about all the time he might have saved in life if he had known others like her, women who were not simply seeking his affection.

But as he was just about to ask her more about her life and her feelings that led her to detest marriage, Lady Oakley's mother, Lady Daleshire, came near and smiled politely at him before grasping her daughter gently by the wrist.

"My dear, come. I must speak with you. Good day to you, Lord Corrington," she said with a placid smile.

"Um…yes. Good day to you as well, Lady Daleshire," he replied, confused by this sudden arrival and the fact that she was clearly eager to get her daughter away from him. Was it possible that Lady Daleshire knew enough of his reputation to desire that her daughter

be nowhere near him? It was strange, trying to balance his understanding of Lady Oakley and her mother with all that he had just learned.

Nevertheless, her mother pulled her away and was whispering something in her ear, in confidence. The way Lady Oakley looked up at her mother, with such distress in her eyes, told him that whatever they were discussing, it had nothing at all to do with him, and her mother must not have given any thought to his reputation. Whatever the reason she had for taking her daughter away, it was another matter entirely.

Milton looked up ahead and decided that he ought to catch up with James and Lady Tennant even if it meant interrupting them. He quickened his pace in order to try and reach them, but he could not help looking back towards Lady Oakley, deeply curious about the incident which had just taken place.

When he saw her, he realised, to his unexpectedly grim dismay, that she was speaking with Lord Stanton, of all people.

Proud, sneering, and evidently full of expectation that Lady Oakley would bow to his every command, Lord Stanton stood tall and firm with his eyes scanning the park as if searching for someone better than her. It was an awful display, and yet, Milton could hardly express why it bothered him so greatly. After all, Lady Oakley was no one to him. She was simply an interesting young woman.

It wasn't as though she really meant anything more than that. No woman ever would.

Chapter 5

Tess made every effort to be polite with Lord Stanton, but everything that dripped from his lips was proud and filled with self-love. There was something about him that simply disgusted her.

“Yes, well, I thought the evening was decent enough, but the refreshments were rather lacking, do you not think?” he sneered.

“Oh, you are quite right, Lord Stanton. Quite right,” her mother said, catering to his behaviour as if there was an acceptable reason for him to be so harsh in his judgments about the event.

“Thank you, Lady Daleshire. I am glad that someone else is willing to concede to the fact that it ought to have been a better time,” he said.

“Do you truly believe that?” Tess asked, challenging him.

Lord Stanton’s face was blank for a moment, but he soon blinked his eyes, and then a look of amusement crossed over his expression. He appeared to think she was joking, or perhaps that she was not intelligent enough to have a say in the matter.

“Of course I do. And surely, I am not the only one. After all, think about what the evening entailed. There was not even a rum-soaked fruitcake,” he said, referring to something so delightful that it was reserved only for weddings. Did he really believe that anyone would serve it simply at a ball? Was he so foolish?

There was something so deeply appalling about Lord Stanton that Tess was not sure exactly what to say. He clearly thought that he was worthy of things far beyond the average, and that was a shock considering that their idea of an average ball was far greater than what Tess imagined it was for those outside of noble society. She couldn't imagine how Lord Stanton might possibly get by without humiliating himself each day in his life if he said things like this.

Nevertheless, Tess wished to understand him and give him a chance to remedy his nonsensical thoughts.

"Would you have preferred it if they offered something else? Perhaps something common, but with a greater variety than what was on offer? Would you have enjoyed other biscuits or macaroons or ices?" she asked, recalling that there had only been a small variety of biscuits available and that this could have been the thing which so offended Lord Stanton.

"That would hardly be adequate," he replied, appearing rather unimpressed by her list. Tess could hardly believe him.

"You know, had my father been there, he would have said something to our dear host. It really was quite a shame," he said.

At the mention of Lord Stanton's father, Tess stiffened. She could hardly abide the mention of that man. He was so far beyond anything she had ever imagined for a decent person that the idea of marrying his son left her grim and despondent.

"Was your father busy elsewhere? I trust that he was not gone on

some adventure to the colonies," Tess said, her face sharp and eyes somewhat narrowed. Her mother, still beside her, pinched her arm sharply, and Tess made every effort to hide her flinch from Lord Stanton.

She wanted him to know how greatly she disapproved of his father's treatment of others. Moreover, she thought his work in the colonies was another appalling display of his lack of respect for humanity. In all, the men of their family were the last in the world with whom Tess wished to be acquainted.

"He has just recently returned, as a matter of fact. He did not attend the ball because he was dining with Lord Hutton, whom, as you surely must know, is a close personal friend to the King himself," Lord Stanton said in an effort to raise his own family's status.

"Such an honour that a friend of the King would wish to dine with your own father!" her mother exclaimed, catering to his attempts.

"Yes, I suppose so. Although it hardly seems right that he invited only my father and not myself as well. It was most ungentlemanly," Lord Stanton said.

"And your mother? Should she not also have been invited?" Tess asked.

He scoffed and shook his head, glancing off to where his mother and a few of her friends gossiped.

"Why should he invite her? I understand that, in the past, a woman

was thought to belong in the kitchen. Well, for a wealthy woman who need not cook, where does she belong? Certainly not in the company of a fine man such as Lord Hutton. No, my mother was likely happiest sitting and wiling away her hours with some doily or other she was busy crafting," he said, waving away the thought with such a grave disrespect that Tess released a small gasp of shock that he would be so rude.

If Lord Stanton thought so little of his own mother, what would he think of a wife? What hope did any woman have of being enough for him? He truly believed that women had nothing better to do than to stitch doilies for meaningless decoration? Tess hated stitching such things. She far preferred the engagement of others and going out of the estate and enjoying the world around her. There was no reason for his cruelty.

If Lord Stanton was unwilling to treat her with any form of dignity, as he was unwilling to treat his mother, she had all the more reason to fight against this dreadful match her mother and father had crafted. Moreover, she would be sure to express that very thought the moment she had such a chance alone with her mother.

"Well, I am sure that she had a lovely time," Tess's own mother added, although she could see that this did not go over well in her mother's eyes.

"Yes, well, it is very nice seeing the two of you, but I must be on my way now. You know how it is, being a man of high society. I must be varied in my interactions else people may begin to talk, saying that I have been too keen on one over another," he said, awkwardly laughing as though there were truly something he wished to remedy.

In truth, the sentiment was utterly foolish, and he was simply trying to make himself appear important. Tess could not see anything decent in

the man, and she wanted nothing more than to escape at that very moment. She was thrilled the moment he was gone, and she turned quickly to her mother.

“Do you see why I do not wish to marry him, Mother?” she asked quietly.

Her mother gave her a gentle glare as if trying not to alert any others in the park to the fact that she was displeased with her daughter in that moment.

“I do not. He is an excellent gentleman and the best sort you might hope to spend your life with,” her mother said, unwilling to relent on the fact.

“You cannot pretend that you didn’t dislike dhow he just spoke,” Tess reasoned.

“He spoke as most men speak, my dear. You must give Lord Stanton a chance to remedy himself. In time, when the two of you are married, you shall be able to express to him what you dislike about how he speaks. He shall understand. But you must be prepared to wait for a season,” her mother said.

Tess gritted her teeth, unable to accept the idea that she was simply meant to acceptbe all right with the way Lord Stanton behaved and move on. It was an unbearable thought.

She looked over to where Lord Corrington was with Rue and Lord Haverdell. She found that she would have much preferred to have

remained with him and continued interacting. They had a reasonable banter, and he was actually quite charming. She would have been far more entertained by him than she was by Lord Stanton.

Lord Corrington was witty and clever, which was quite a change for Tess. She appreciated the opportunity to see someone who actually kept up with her. Lord Stanton did not understand it when she made vague remarks meant to express her cynical nature, nor did he see her exuberance as anything other than mere girlishness. Tess had been completely unable to show him that she was more than these things and that there was something deeper to her than he realised.

However, she would have much preferred to not have to worry about men in general. Tess wished that she could escape the idea, but Lord Stanton already considered himself to be her betrothed. Even as she subtlety insulted him in ways he did not understand, or as she tried to question him that he might understand his own nonsense, he appeared to think she was complimenting him. The madness of it left Tess in awe that she was forced to try and communicate her true feelings or remain silent altogether.

He had not even proposed as of yet , but was jealous at the ball. After she had danced with Lord Corrington, Lord Stanton had made some remark about how she ought not to be dancing with his foe when she was devoted to him. It had been difficult not to laugh at the foolishness of his anger.

“Mother, I beg your pardon, but even if you and father force me to marry this man, I shall never care for him. I do wish that you would simply allow me to live happily,” she said, aware by now that her mother was tired of hearing these complaints.

“Enough, Tess. We are enjoying an afternoon out in Hyde Park. The sun is finally starting to come out after a rather chilly morning. You

look beautiful. You must rejoice in these things and hold to them. After all, there is only so much of life that one spends as a lovely young woman and your father, and I would be grieved to see you behave dishonourably," her mother warned.

"I would never dishonour you, Mother," she replied. "That is Lord Stanton's duty."

"Oh, good heavens," her mother grumbled, walking away from Tess, clearly having had enough of her.

Although Tess felt bad for frustrating her mother, she also knew that she was right. It was precisely how Lord Stanton treated his own mother. And Tess had no intention of behaving like him, even if it was acceptable for him to do so. She was a better woman than that and would not give in to such acts.

Then again, she was sure by now, her mother was evidently exhausted by these things and thought she was being disrespectful by simply sharing her opposition to the union. That was certainly something Tess felt she needed to acknowledge and remedy. How ever she tried to fight the match, she would need to do so in a way that did not so deeply frustrate her mother.

After a moment of standing on her own, Tess hurriedly, yet gracefully, made her way to where Rue and the two gentlemen sat on a bench nearby. Rue made space so that Tess was sitting beside her, with Lord Corrington standing on the other side, leaning against a tree.

"And how is the good and virtuous Lord Stanton?" Lord Corrington asked, a mocking tone in his voice, which only served to make Tess struggle against her own amusement.

“Good and virtuous, hmm?” she asked.

“Tess…” Rue warned quietly.

“Yes, indeed. I have heard that he is moral enough to keep only a dozen slaves as opposed to his father’s hundreds,” Lord Corrington quipped dryly.

Struck by the fact that he cared so much about this fact, Tess eyed him for a long moment. He returned her gaze and then raised an eyebrow.

“Forgive me. Have I offended you?” he asked. “If you have this belief in common with Lord Stanton, I fear that I must be off and away.”

“No, that is not it at all,” she said, surprised.

He paused as if waiting for an explanation that Tess wasn’t quite ready to give. And yet, how could she ignore it? He had decried one of the very things which she found most repulsive about Lord Stanton and his father. Was it possible that Lord Corrington was a man of similar morals to Tess?

“I…I have met so few who are willing to speak against his father’s beliefs in regards to such things. Even as I have declared my own anger, which burns against it,” she confessed.

“It is true. She frequently speaks of her support for the abolitionists and that she disapproves of Lord Stanton and his father,” Rue said.

“Well, that is a fine thing, indeed,” Lord Corrington said, looking at Tess with keen eyes. It was clear to her that he was interested in her particular dislike of Lord Stanton and his family’s beliefs.

“I find that anyone silent on the issue must be deeply unaware of the extent of the cruelty involved. However, my own father, who disagrees with the idea of slavery altogether, has even approved of our family’s interactions with Lord Henbridge and his own,” she explained.

“Well, it is a fine thing to meet a woman who is passionate about this. I, myself, have spoken out in support of the abolitionist movement, and I would truly enjoy speaking with you further about your thoughts on the matter. It is nice to get a fresh perspective,” Lord Corrington said.

For a long moment, Tess maintained eye contact with him, as if they were trying to read one another and understand if they truly did feel the same on this topic when so many others did nothing. But she felt the eyes of Rue upon her, and Tess realised with a sudden discomfort that she had been a bit too keen on Lord Corrington, too interested in his own opinions.

“I should be more than happy to share my thoughts,” she finally replied before turning to Rue and deciding it was high time for a change of subject.

For a long moment, nothing came to mind, but then she thought of

the very thing that Rue was always happy to discuss.

“And for my two dear friends, I must ask about your wedding plans. Are they coming along well?” she asked.

Rue gave her a playful look with narrowed eyes and suspicion. Tess tried to ignore it, but she knew precisely what her friend was getting at. Rue was trying to suggest that there just might be something between Tess and Lord Corrington if they got along so well as this.

But Tess would not relent. She cared nothing about Rue’s foolish suspicions or anything else for that matter. She knew that there was nothing at all between herself and this man. They were bound only by their mutual dislike of marriage and Lord Stanton, who believed in a despicable practice. Beyond that, there was nothing at all that mattered.

Tess was who she was, and she would never give in, never relent to the idea that she had to make herself ready or available for any man. And yet…she had a strange idea that this could all work in her favour.

Chapter 6

Milton brushed his fingers through his hair to ensure that everything was in place. He had no intention of setting his sights on any young woman that evening, but he still desired to look his best just in case.

They arrived at the home of Lord Michael Tennant, Earl of Rossridge, and Milton walked just behind James into the parlour where everyone was gathered. There were two tables of cards, a violinist in the corner accompanied by a soprano, although it looked as though the woman singing believed that she was the one leading the music. Others were mingling beside the fireplace or on the balcony overlooking the gardens.

Lady Tennant was seated near Lady Oakley, who was busily eyeing the refreshments with a keen interest, clearly attempting to look as though she was not greedy or gluttonous. It was charming to see her gaze upon the food.

“I assume you wish to go to your intended?” Milton asked James, actually hoping that they would go to the ladies so that he might have an opportunity to speak with Lady Oakley.

“Of course. That is always my goal,” James replied.

They made their way over to the women who sat regally, appearing rather full of laughter and merriment. It amused Milton to no end, watching them entertain themselves, but he was glad when he and James were able to interrupt doethem for just a moment to speak with them.

“Hello, my darling,” James greeted Lady Tennant as he often did.

Milton locked his eyes on Lady Oakley, who smiled at him in kind. There was something about her expression that told Milton she wished to speak with him.

“If you will excuse me,” she said to her friend and James, who watched her stand. She gave Milton the slightest nod, urging him to follow her. “I should like to go to the balcony and look over the gardens.”

“I believe I should like the same,” he said, following her. They made their way out and were soon far enough from others that they could speak in confidence but still visible enough with the open door that they had no reason to fear impropriety. Milton knew that being alone with him could cause Lady Oakley’s reputation harm if they were not cautious.

“Lady Oakley, may I be so bold as to ask whether or not you intended to have me follow you?” he asked.

She glanced at him with a mischievous smile.

“If I did not wish to have you follow me, you would not have. Please do not doubt my ability to maintain my privacy, Lord Corrington,” she said.

Charmed as always by her, Milton nodded.

“Very well,” he said. “And to what do I owe this attempt to be alone with me?”

“I have a rather bold idea,” she said openly. “It is one which you may find that you detest, and I would not doubt if you are appalled by my suggestion. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that we discuss a matter which is of concern to us both.”

“I see. And what is this matter, precisely? What would you like to discuss?” he asked, deeply curious.

“I am being pushed into an engagement, as I am sure you are aware. It is with Lord Stanton, and I have not been subtle in expressing that I wish to avoid this particular match. Of course, as you also know, I should like to avoid *any* match,” she said, clarifying the latter point.

“Yes, I am aware,” Milton replied.

“Well, then you must be aware that if I am being forced to marry, it is difficult enough. But being forced to marry a man I cannot abide is positively wicked. I do, however, believe that there is a way in which we might help one another,” she said.

“And how is that?” Milton asked, looking at her with keen eyes, searching to know what was bothering her so much that he could be the only one to assist her.

“I am curious to know one thing first. Do others attempt to push you into marriage?” Lady Oakley asked.

Milton scoffed. He was so frequently pushed towards marriage that it was agony. Not only did he have to deal with the young women who were always at his side, but he had to deal with their parents. The mothers and fathers who believed that he was tamable, who knew nothing of his deep and true reasons for being unwilling to marry, they were always there. Besides them, his aunt was constantly urging him towards marriage, saying what a joy it is, what a blessing.

Oftentimes, Milton felt as if he might never escape the expectations of others. Even James was convinced that he would change his mind one day. He clearly believed that Milton simply needed to find the right girl, and he would settle for a match. Not even his closest friend understood that Milton was quite serious about his unwillingness to enter such a contracted union.

But when Milton looked at Lady Oakley, he understood that she truly just might have a solution. The desperation in her eyes told him that she hoped as much, that she believed there was a way out of this. He wondered if it could truly be, if they might actually have a choice. And, if they did, would he be able to live up to her expectation of it?

“Lady Oakley, I am often called upon for courtships, expected to marry,” he confessed.

“And you have no desire to engage in it?” she asked.

“I do not,” he confirmed.

“I am not asking if you simply wish to delay the matter. I need to know if you have the same devotion as I, the stark determination and commitment that you shall never give in to the pressures of society which demand that you marry,” she said, her tone eager and hopeful.

“I have said it, and I assure you, Lady Oakley. I have no intention to marry. Ever. I am quite opposed to it,” he said again.

She grinned at him for a long moment before telling him exactly what this was all about.

“Your Grace, I do believe that we may be able to help one another,” she said plainly.

“How so? I am deeply intrigued, but you have not yet told me precisely what it is that we may do for one another,” he said.

“Well, in order that we might both manage to avoid unwanted unions that are forced upon us, I thought that we might arrange a match of our own. You see, we both understand that there shall never be a match between us as we both detest marriage, but others might not see it that way,” she hinted.

It struck Milton at once, and he believed that he understood precisely what she was suggesting. Still, he wanted to be sure that he was grasping her idea correctly and looked to her to explain.

“By which, you are suggesting that…”

“That we pretend to court,” she stated.

Milton thought that it was a brilliant idea. It would certainly prevent him from having to deal with the obnoxious and overbearing mothers that were so frequently badgering him within society. Perhaps, if he was so fortunate, he would manage to avoid the entire ordeal, pushing aside the typical desires of those older men and women who demanded that he marry from among their daughters.

If he pretended to court Lady Oakley, no one would be the wiser about the arrangement and the fact that it was all just for show. The two of them could pretend to fall in love. He could behave as though he might propose so that her mother and father would end her courtship with Lord Stanton. After all, who would wish their daughter to marry a future earl when she could have a man who was already a duke?

Such a wonderful plot! She was truly brilliant for coming up with the idea.

“Lady Oakley, I do believe that you are correct. You have found a way to prevent all others from expecting that we might be subject to unions which we find disagreeable. Tell me, do you truly believe that it shall work for you as well? Will your mother and father consent to your dismissal of Lord Stanton in favour of another man?” he asked.

“I believe that it shall give them enough pause to allow the two of you to fight for my affections, as it were. If I begin to show favour to you, Lord Stanton’s pride shall be wounded enough that I expect him to relent and dismiss me altogether. Then, once I am free, we carry on the arrangement simply long enough to omit all doubt,” she said.

“And once that has been dealt with?” he asked.

“We quietly go our separate ways, both appearing grieved by the separation, but both declaring that it was rightly done, that we understood we were simply never meant for one another after all,” she said.

“You know that such an excuse is going to generate gossip,” he said.

“Very well, what do you think? What reason might we give?” she asked.

“A young woman’s virtue is subject to more gossip than a man’s, and I already have a reputation for being a rake. We might as well claim that you found me to be too flirtatious with other women. Not only would that put off others from ever pursuing me again, but you could declare that I broke your heart to such an extent that you shall never trust another man again,” he said.

Lady Oakley raised her brow at him in disapproval.

“You mean that I must claim I loved you so deeply that you wounded me beyond the telling of it? Of course. Because women are merely simpering fools?” she asked.

Milton couldn’t help but grin and laugh. Only Lady Oakley would see it that way. She was marvellous.

“All right, very well then. You must declare that you would never subject yourself to such indignities again and that I only proved that even a man who appears to have changed likely has a foul heart. You may tell everyone that you found me so repulsive you need time to actually have hope in another man,” he said.

“That is somewhat better,” she said, clearly pleased by this option.

“And how would you like for us to begin?” Milton asked.

Lady Oakley glanced back inside, looking around the room.

“My mother has just arrived with a friend of hers. She shall see us interacting, as will Lord Haverdell and Lady Tennant. Lord Stanton is not here, which works in our favour. I believe, Your Grace, that you must spend the evening making every effort to impress and pursue me, to the extent of propriety,” she said, beaming with pride.

“Is that so? Very well, I shall do just that,” he said.

“And you must send your card around. Soon. Before Lord Stanton comes to propose,” she instructed.

“You shall have it first thing in the morning,” he promised, eager to get the plan into motion.

Milton realised just how perfect this was going to be. Lady Oakley was brilliant, and her desperation to avoid marriage and Lord Stanton had become a great fortune for him. All he wanted now was to see it through and be sure that they were not forced into a position of having to explain after the fact. If it did not work as they hoped, there could be significant struggle. But he expected all to go well.

Lady Oakley smiled at him, but he saw that it was one of a firm understanding of business. This was her plan for the future, to pretend that she was going to marry him and use it as a way of avoiding a true union. He could not fault her such a clever effort, nor criticise her reasons for doing it. If there was anything he intended to assist her with, in this matter, it was to be certain that they fooled everyone.

Milton would not fail her. He needed this, as well.

“I am glad that we understand one another,” she said.

“As am I. I appreciate your considering how this might help me as well. I do look forward to acting out our parts and causing others to believe that this is something we have only just discovered of ourselves—some sort of romantic notion,” he said.

“I trust that you shall maintain the secret? Even from your dear friend, Lord Haverdell?” she asked, looking at him with a stern warning in her eyes.

“You have my word on this as well, Lady Oakley. I assure you that we are understood. There is nothing that I shall speak of to any other. I am able to keep my silence, and I trust that you shall do the same,” he said.

“Thank you, Lord Corrington. You are most agreeable in this matter,” she said, straightening her back and looking him in the eye. She truly did have lovely eyes, and it was easy for Milton to return her gaze for a moment.

“Perhaps we ought to make our way inside? Our friends are surely awaiting us, and we do have a show to put on,” he said.

“Most definitely, Your Grace,” she replied, turning from him in that confident manner of hers and making her way back inside.

For a long moment, Milton felt conflicted by the plot to which he had just agreed. Something deep inside warned him that this may not go as he planned, after all. There was something about Lady Oakley, something that threatened him with curiosity and even a bit of longing.

Perhaps he was merely sad that he would not be able to use her to flirt and have a dalliance as he so often did. But he couldn’t believe that was all it was. After all, Lady Oakley was different. He had no desire to treat her the same as other women because there was nothing about her that was the same as them.

No, indeed. Milton simply wanted to be around her, to interact with her, to communicate with her. Whatever the future may look like, he trusted that they would continue to interact and be friends of a sort. He hoped, anyway, that a day would come in which their mutual frustrations with the things expected of them would do something rather unique and remarkable.

He hoped that, just as they would find a way of maintaining their independence, they may also come to find that they actually were true friends. That thought gave him some comfort.

Chapter 7

Tess could hardly sit still in the blue drawing room the next morning. She knew what was soon to come, what would finally spark the beginning of her arrangement with Lord Corrington. Eager and desperate for the moment to arrive, she tried to busy herself with other things.

However, the stitching would not take her mind off of the hope that she wouldn't be marrying Lord Stanton. Nor was she aided by her time spent practising the pianoforte, although she was furious enough of her own lack of musical ability that she nearly managed to be distracted.

Unfortunately, Tess was overwhelmed by many other things, including the realisation that there was nothing she could actually do to escape the match with Lord Stanton if she and Lord Corrington were not convincing. In fact, if they were to be discovered in this plot of theirs, she was certain that she would lose her reputation altogether, as well as having to accept the furies of her mother and father.

Lord Stanton would ruin her. She had little doubt that he would take great pleasure in destroying everything left of her, and it would be a most grievous circumstance.

Nevertheless, Tess could not resist the possibility of her freedom. When she imagined what it would feel like to escape all of this madness, nothing was so lovely as the idea that she would not have to accept whatever rule others attempted to place over her.

"Tess!" came a shout from the hallway.

She looked up, her eyes wide with hope. This had to be it. There was no reason for her mother to be shouting like this, to be so excitable.

Bursting through the door, her mother rushed in, a flurry of energy in such a tizzy that Tess could hardly believe her eyes.

“Mother? Good heavens. I have scarcely ever seen you this way. What is the matter?” Tess asked casually. She believed it better to behave as though she was utterly unaware of the strange occurrence that led to her mother’s actions.

“Tess, dear. Look at this. Do you see it? It is from none other than the Duke of Corrington. Goodness gracious! I can hardly believe this,” her mother exclaimed.

“Why would he send his card here? How strange…” she said calmly.

“Strange? I should think not. Not after the way the two of you interacted last evening. Oh, I knew that he had set his sights on you—the way he was following you around and laughing and behaving as though he had never met a woman quite like you,” her mother said.

“Mother, you cannot possibly mean to suggest that Lord Corrington has set his sights on me,” Tess scoffed, playing her part well as if she had never anticipated such interest. She felt quite certain that if she forced her mother into convincing Tess, it would only serve to further force her mother into believing it.

“Of course, I do! Did you not notice how he treated you last evening? It was so clear that he has grown deeply attached to you,” her mother said.

“I would not go so far as to declare that, Mother. He may have paid attention to me, but I would not say that it is any sort of attachment. Do you believe that he has an interest? Truly? Something aside from mere flirtation?” Tess asked.

“It does appear so,” she said.

“Well, that is very interesting. He does have a reputation for flirtation. If you believe that he actually has a care for me beyond that, it would certainly be interesting. I simply wish that I could find a way to know for certain if there is any sort of chance of a match,” she said.

“He wishes to come around for lunch today. Oh, but I know that Lord Stanton would be furious, and we really cannot risk such a thing. He is the man you are intended for,” her mother said.

“Mother, he has not proposed marriage as of yet, and I do not like him. If there are others who wish to make a play for my affections, is it really so wrong for me to try and discern whether or not I should like to get to know these men?” she asked.

Her mother seemed to consider that for a moment, clearly wondering if Tess was right. Tess couldn’t help feeling hopeful. Her chest swelled with eagerness, a hope that she would be able to make her mother understand that this might work out in their family’s favour.

Of course, it was also a way for her mother to begin to let go of the expectation she had that Tess would find herself married to Lord Stanton. If possible, Tess wanted to remove that possibility entirely. Maybe through this potential match, her mother and father would give her more time to find someone better and, by the time it was too late, and Tess had been declared a spinster, they would have accepted that she had never been destined to marry.

She would never be relegated to stitching doilies. She would never sit in the doldrums of the parlour, just waiting around for when her husband would return and grant her permission to go and visit with her friends. She would not have to ensure that her hair was done first thing in the morning, for she could sleep late and make herself comfortable unless she needed to be presentable for something special.

In all, Tess was eager to have the independence she craved, and she expected that her mother and father needed only a push towards the idea that she really didn't need the life they expected for her. Lord Corrington was already doing his part to make that happen.

"Well, I suppose that you are right on the point that Lord Stanton has not yet proposed. Perhaps, if you should like to entertain the possibility of a match with Lord Corrington, this could even urge him to be quick about his proposal," her mother said.

"You believe that Lord Stanton would only be inclined to propose sooner?" Tess asked, dreading the thought.

"Why, of course he would! There is nothing at all to make me believe that he would allow another man to come in his stead and sweep you away, my dear. Believe me, Tess, if you allow Lord Corrington to make an attempt at courting you, Lord Stanton shall do everything

within his power to see to it that he is married to you first," her mother said.

"And if I decide that I prefer Lord Corrington?" she asked.

"If he also chooses to be loyal to you, I cannot see any reason you should not make a match of him. After all, he is a duke. It could be worth considering, given his position and the fact that you dislike Lord Stanton for some strange reason," her mother said.

"I am thrilled that you feel this way, Mother. If you are willing to give me a chance to find out whether or not I truly like Lord Corrington, I would be most grateful," she said.

"Tell me, Tess, did you truly enjoy his attentions last evening?" her mother asked.

Tess thought back to the previous night. Lord Corrington had smiled at her frequently, had applauded when she won a game of cards, had manoeuvred to sit beside her at dinner by asking that dreadful Lady Figgins to trade seats with him so that she might better be able to hear what Rue's father was going on about during the meal. He had done a wonderful job to appear interested in her without coming across as an inconsolable flirt.

And yet, Tess truly had enjoyed his attentions. She enjoyed the way he teased her about little things, such as her competitive nature and the determination she felt to push herself into a better position of seeing the performers who came later in the evening and how it was difficult for her, being so short in comparison to some of the gentlemen.

Tess wondered why his teasing made her feel a small thrill, but she chose not to labour on the thought. After all, whatever the reason, she felt that it was clear she and Lord Corrington had the right kind of chemistry to convince others that they would fit well together. It did not appear as though they would struggle to demonstrate their familiarity. If Tess's mother believed it, she was confident that anyone would.

But her mother had asked her a question, and Tess knew that she had to answer. The fact that her answer was honest was simply a fortune she had not anticipated.

"Yes, Mother. I did, indeed, enjoy my time with him last evening. He is rather a good man, and I felt as though he truly understood and even respected me. It was a very different interaction than most which I experience with gentlemen in town," she said.

"I am glad to hear that. You are so stubborn about the men in society that I feel as though we shall never find a husband for you. But if you are finally willing to accept a match, it means that we shall make accommodations. I know that your father has worked very hard to arrange matters between you and Lord Stanton, but I expect that he should not be disappointed by the idea of your marriage to a duke instead," her mother said.

"Well, that is something, I suppose," Tess replied.

"Indeed, it is. Yes, perhaps this is something worth considering after all. To be honest, I thought that it was rather improper of him at first. After all, I believed that most people understood that you are spoken for by Lord Stanton and surely knows that a proposal was soon to be made," her mother began.

“However…” Tess said, encouraging her mother to this point.

“However, the proposal has not yet been made, and if the Duke of Corrington really does care for you, I should not be upset about his idea in making you an offer. Even if he simply begins courting you now, there is no shame in it. Lord Stanton may relent, and this is a good way of discovering whether or not he really does care for you,” her mother said.

“Yes, I suppose it is. If he does not care for me, well, it hardly matters. After all, Lord Stanton is a man with the attention of many young women, and I expect that he shall be perfectly all right if I am suddenly unavailable to him,” she said, hopeful that this would truly be the situation.

A small part of herself did not believe it. If Lord Stanton learned that Tess was being courted by another man, she was certain that he would be furious, that he would take it out against her and possibly even be so bold as to come up against Lord Corrington. But what more could Tess do? It was the only way out of the arrangement, and Lord Corrington had already agreed. Everything was coming together, and she no longer needed to fear it.

“Now, my dear, you must decide,” her mother said. “Are you going to send to the duke, telling him that you should like for him to join us for lunch?”

Tess smiled and gave a single nod.

“Indeed, Mother. I should like to see whether or not I truly like him

and, if I doso, I may consider further the opportunity to be courted by him. If I dislike him, it shall be easy enough to simply return to the man who has already expressed such a keen interest in me," she said.

"Ah, yes, very well. That is a wise thought, my dear. You and Lord Corrington shall spend the afternoon together and, if you like him and he likes you well enough, we may have a future put together soon enough. Oh, I truly would love it if you married a duke," her mother said.

With that, Tess's mother departed from the room, babbling on about how she needed to tell the kitchen staff to prepare something grand. She would also need to inform Tess's father, who would likely be unable to attend the lunch as he was most often in town on business. Indeed, it did seem a bit strange that Lord Corrington would arrange it in this way, but Tess's mother had not noticed, and it was all a very good thing for Tess.

She was eager to see to it that her mother and father would give her a bit of room for her own decisions, and this was the first step in that. Her mother had already approved of the fact that Tess wished to see if there was another man out there who could make her happier than Lord Stanton.

And if her mother was willing to concede, Tess knew with certainty that her father would do much the same.

There was a strange excitement in the air as she wrote back to him, telling him that he was most welcome and that her mother was eager for him to join them for the meal. Tess knew that she was possibly tempting fate, but it could not have been more wonderful to feel as though the future was at hand.

Her freedom was so near. Her joy so full. And all she could think about was how fortunate she had been to meet a man with whom she got along well and who also detested the structures of marriage. She crafted her note to him without all of that, of course, but she still felt a rush in writing to him.

Lord Corrington,

Thank you for sending your card around. We would love to see you at lunch. My mother is most eager for you to join the meal, and you are welcome to come at any time, which is of convenience to you.

Lady Tess Oakley

She had the footman take the note and then returned to her room to make herself look more presentable. Although there was no reason to look beautiful, she was convinced that she would have to for the sake of her mother. After all, her mother would be wondering why Tess did not make every intention to garner the attention of this man. It was simply another reason Tess couldn't stop thinking about Lord Corrington.

Would he truly believe that she was beautiful? Or was he doing all of this for his own show as well? Did he have a care for her at all? Did that matter? And what would Tess do if she found, one day, that they got along so well that their friendship might be difficult to discern from the very thing which they were trying to avoid?

At that last thought, Tess felt a wave of panic wash over her.

No. She would not think about that. Not now. The best thing for her to do was to go and make herself ready for the afternoon ahead, whatever it may entail.

Chapter 8

Milton arrived at the estate of Lord and Lady Daleshire with a strange sense of wonder and heightened energy. He could not explain it, but there was something so very fun about pretending. He was enjoying the idea that he would be able to put on this funny little show of a match, this silly bond that he was pretending to make with Lady Oakley.

He knew that it would have to be convincing, carrying on from the previous evening. After all, her mother had seen them together, but he was not yet confident that she was convinced. He worried that she might think that there was something strange about it in that she likely knew her daughter was not seeking marriage and everyone knew Milton's reputation against such a thought.

But when he entered the estate and found the two women awaiting him, he felt as though he was being greeted by any other young debutante and her mother or father. It was very much the same process, and he had to charmingly bow and grin at them.

"Good afternoon, ladies. I am so grateful that you were able to accommodate me at such short notice. I understand that you are likely very busy and do not simply have an abundance of time for a man such as me," he said.

"Oh, nonsense. We do always have time for fine gentlemen who wish to come and speak with us," Lady Daleshire said, looking between Milton and her daughter. It was painful to be eyed in this way, as though he was just waiting for the next offer of marriage and wanted to escape it no matter the cost.

“Well, Lady Daleshire, I am glad that you would welcome me so heartily. I assure you that I am just a man like any other, and I hope that I do not disappoint you,” he said.

“Me? No, I think you could never disappoint me. Nor my daughter who, if you had not noticed, seems to be looking rather lovely,” her mother said, much to the evident chagrin of her daughter.

“Thank you, Mother, but I do believe that the Duke of Corrington is able to make that decision on his own,” she said with great embarrassment.

“Indeed, Lady Daleshire, I am. And I must say that I do, indeed, believe that she is as ravishing a young lady as I have ever seen. Lady Oakley, you are stunning, as always,” he said.

She clearly looked as though she might burst into laughter at his attempts to flatter her, but Milton did not mind. He was busily trying to keep up the appearance of their match, and it appeared to be working reasonably well for the moment.

“Shall we walk in the gardens before lunch?” her mother suggested before Milton could say anything further.

“That sounds lovely,” he replied.

They adjourned outside, making their way into the gardens and walking among the shrubbery for a short while until they reached the rosebushes. Lady Daleshire walked at a great distance behind,

chaperoning Milton and Lady Oakley while still giving them a great deal of space to walk ahead and speak without being overheard. It was a perfect opportunity for them to get to know one another better, and if this had all been a genuine attempt at a match, it would have been ideal.

“How does your mother feel about another man trying to court you? Was she concerned about Lord Stanton?” Milton asked.

“At first, she was, indeed. But I did my very best to explain to her that it is to our family’s benefit that I give you the chance to win my affections,” she said.

“How so?”

“Well, you are a duke, as opposed to a future earl. That, in itself, is quite a fortune to stumble upon. I do believe that my mother and father would approve purely for that. However, I was also able to suggest that because she knows that I have no affection for Lord Stanton, this could be an opportunity to make me happy and grant me a husband I could actually care for. She knows nothing of what is to come of this,” Lady Oakley said.

“I am relieved to know that she feels that way. I do hope that I can assist you in this charade for a very long time,” he said.

“I am sure that you shall.”

“May I ask, why exactly are you so against marriage? I understand not wishing to marry Lord Stanton as he is an awful man, but there are

others who are good and decent. My friend, Lord Haverdell, for instance. Why would you not seek a decent man?" Milton asked.

Lady Oakley took a deep breath and sighed, shaking her head. The sun was shining on her blonde curls, and it gave her a strikingly angelic appearance that Milton was surprised by. For a moment, he was rather caught up in eyeing her. But then, he recalled that he had asked her a serious question, one which was clearly giving her pause to consider.

"Well, I understand that a young woman is meant to be nothing more than a desperate future bride, but it is not me. I love my independence. Moreover, I do not wish to be anyone's property. Being the daughter of an earl is already enough of a task. To have to suffer the consequences of being the property of a husband is equally demeaning, and it is not something I should wish for anyone," she said.

"I understand. That would be quite difficult. But do you believe that all men would subject you to that fate?"

"They cannot help it. It is the way of society. Even if a man were to give me freedom within the home, the moment we stepped out of it, I would become his shadow once more. I must be seen and not heard. I must walk behind him, smiling and curtseying, but remaining silent," she said.

"So you wish to be able to speak out? You want your voice to be heard?" Milton asked, trying to understand.

"That is only a part of it," she said.

Milton waited, seeing the difficulty of the conversation for her. He wished that he could help her in understanding that not all men would put her in that place, but it was clear that she had lived through enough of life as a young woman in England that she couldn't see it any other way.

"What is the other part?" he asked her, rather gently.

"It is that I am not even allowed to *have* my own opinions. It is one thing to be forced to remain silent on them, but to have to support whatever my husband says, regardless of my thoughts on the matter? I could not suffer such a thing," she said.

Milton understood that, and he also realised why a marriage to Lord Stanton would be so impossible. He was a supporter of slavery, and Lady Oakley was firmly against it. If they were married, she would have to remain silent and would never be allowed to take a stand against the practice.

But, he knew, this was not the only area which would be difficult for her. There were many things she likely had opinions on and would have to keep them to herself.

"I feel awful that society has made it thusly for women. I apologise, Lady Oakley. Those are very fair reasons," he said.

"Thank you," she replied stoically.

They continued to walk, and he breathed in the fresh air, the scent of

flowers around them, the beauty of the day. It was a strikingly lovely time, and he was beginning to wonder why he had never enjoyed these moments more. This was hardly the first time he had walked in gardens with a young woman. So many had invited him for lunch and to try captivating his attention.

But never before had he actually had a nice time. Perhaps it was to do with the fact that there was no unreasonable pressure upon him just now. He and Lady Oakley were of the same mind, whereas in the past, he had been forced to convince a woman that she would not wish to marry him any more than he wished to marry her.

“And you?” Lady Oakley asked suddenly.

Milton was startled. What about him?

“I beg your pardon?” he asked.

“What is the reason that you detest marriage and wish to avoid it at all costs?” she asked.

Milton sucked in a deep breath. He had not been prepared to answer that and was desperate to ensure that she had a good reason from him, even if it was not the full answer. He had long been trying to convince others of his reasoning for not approving of marriage, but there were only a few times in his life that he had sactually needed to give an account of it.

As they walked together, he understood that this was really all his fault. He had been the one to question Lady Oakley first. It was only

reasonable that she would want to know the same thing from him. Of course, Milton had to give her an answer, but the full truth of it was far too painful to share. Instead, he would simply have to use his favourite excuse, the one he frequently shared with other men who urged him to find a wife.

“Well, it is a rather difficult task to choose a woman and remain with her,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that committing to one woman for a man’s entire life is…not exactly what I might deem to be the most exciting adventure,” he said with a laugh.

Lady Oakley raised her eyebrow at him, and he realised that he had been offensive. He would need to make up for it, to find a better way to word his response. The way he shared it with men was not the way he could share it with a woman; he was coming to realise.

“Forgive me, Lady Oakley. What I mean is that I do not wish to be tied down. I enjoy being able to live freely,” he said.

“It is a different sort of freedom,” she said.

“Yes, it is. For a woman to be free of a husband is that she should maintain her autonomy and identity. But for a man, it means that I am able to avoid the restrictions that are imposed on a man by having a wife,” he said vaguely. While Milton did not want her to think that he was a terrible lout, he also needed to cling to this excuse of his.

Certainly, he did not have a great number of dalliances but mere flirtations. That was enough for him. He did not have the energy to entertain as many women as the rumours may have stated. There were so many other things in life he cared about more.

“You are such a rake,” she said, teasing him and shaking her head.

Surprised by her boldness, Milton burst out laughing.

“My goodness, you do not mind saying what is on your mind. Well, yes, I do have a reputation as a rake, but I do not mind so much. After all, even a rake has a heart, does he not?” Milton asked.

She appeared amused, and he was glad for that. There was something about Lady Oakley that Milton was struck by, and he had no reason for it that he could express, but he was glad to know that she was at least intrigued by him as he was by her.

Their arrangement would work far better if they did have this level of friendship as opposed to disliking one another entirely. Although Milton was coming to realise that he had never quite had something like this with a woman, this familiarity, he appreciated it a great deal.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she finally said, sighing. “Even a rake has a heart. I expect that even you are the sort of man who is adored by others. Certainly the fawning young women, but by your friends and your family as well. If they know your heart, I expect they know it better than I do. They care for you regardless of your rakish behaviour.”

“They do, indeed. You know that Lord Haverdell is a good man, a moral man. He is marrying your friend because of that. And if he can abide my company as he does, cannot any man?” Milton asked grinning.

“I suppose, but as you have mentioned, he is a good man. And, as such, perhaps he only makes you believe that he enjoys your company because he is far too kind to admit to you that you are appalling in every way,” she teased, pausing along the path.

For a long moment, they locked eyes, their mutual sparring a tether between them. It was as though something had brought them unexpectedly close, and Milton wondered what this might mean for him in the future.

Why was his heart beginning to pour? Why did he feel a heat in his cheeks? He had never experienced this when interacting with a young woman. Moreover, he saw the same blush in hers, the same expression as though something unexpected had taken place.

Whatever it was, Milton could not understand how he had met the only woman in England, seemingly, who did not wish to marry and yet she was the only woman in England with whom he could get along so well.

Lady Oakley broke their gaze first, turning back to the path ahead and walking once more. Milton quickly followed, straightening his back and clearing his throat. The last thing he wanted was to behave as though all of this was nothing, and yet, he could not help wishing that Lady Oakley had never come into his life to make him question his motivations against marriage.

“Your mother will wonder whether or not our conversation is going well,” he said.

“Yes, I expect she shall,” Lady Oakley replied.

“And what will you say to her?”

“I shall tell her that you are most agreeable, and I would like to be courted by you. If she approves, it will give me an opportunity to set Lord Stanton aside. You must work very hard to impress her at lunch,” Lady Oakley said, her voice formal in contrast to the earlier amusement.

“I shall make every effort. And if she asks me about my reputation as a rake?” he asked.

Lady Oakley turned to him once more and smiled.

“You shall tell her that you have turned a new leaf. Tell her that I am the only woman in the world who could make you commit to marriage.”

Chapter 9

“And I want to have a nice, new pair of shoes made for the day. Mother says that I am spoiled, but I can see that she is eager to have me wearing something new as well,” Rue said, going on about her wedding day as they sat in her room.

Tess was happy to hear about it. She was so excited for Rue to have a lovely day and to be exactly the bride she wished to be. It was going to be a very grand affair, and there would be many people who would come to see Rue and Lord Haverdell get married, but Tess was honoured that she would be there as Rue’s dearest friend.

“It sounds as though you are going to be the loveliest bride in all of England. Then again, I expected nothing less,” Tess remarked.

“Good heavens, Tess, you are far too complimentary in your words. As it is, I am nothing more than an average bride who is fortunate enough to have wealth which enables me to look my best,” Rue said, perfectly reasonably.

“And what more? What else have you got planned for this grand day?” Tess asked.

Rue smiled to herself in a sweet way. For a moment, Tess longed to be excited about something the way that Rue was excited for her wedding.

“We have a plan to invite the Edgerton Choir to sing at the reception,

and it shall be a stunning display of voices and song—all to celebrate my darling husband and myself," she said.

"That is remarkable! The Edgerton Choir is one of the most astounding in all of England. I am in awe of the fact that you have managed to recruit them to sing for your wedding. You know, I heard that they were to sing at the wedding of the King's nephew, but he gambled all the money away and could not pay. Can you believe it?" Tess asked, sharing in the gossip, although there was something in her gut that was bothered by all that they were discussing.

Tess tried to ignore it as best she could, but it was difficult to deny that the idea of a grand wedding and being surrounded by friends and a stunning choir was actually rather tempting. Never in her life had she thought that she would want something like that, but as Rue went on and on about how marvellous it would be, Tess pictured herself standing at the altar in a lovely gown, with her hair pinned with diamond studs and diamond earrings dangling on either side of her cheek. She had spent so long determined to never have anything close to a romance, but there was certainly something tempting her just now about how marvellous it would be to be a bride.

Despite herself, when she imagined the scene, she saw none other than Lord Corrington standing up there with her as the groom. Certainly, she realised, it was only a matter of the fact that he was the man with whom she was putting on this show, pretending that she would marry him. It wasn't possible that her heart was truly being moved in the direction of wanting it to come to pass. She would never put herself through that.

Even if she was foolhardy enough to feel, in this moment, that she could ever want something like this from Lord Corrington, she knew herself better than to think it would be more than a temporary whim. She was titillated by the idea of a wedding and looking beautiful. Nothing more.

“No matter who has had the Edgerton Choir and who has not, I care only that I shall, and I can promise you that my darling Lord Haverdell would never gamble away the wealth he has,” Rue said.

“I am certain he would not. He is a very responsible man,” Tess agreed.

“He certainly is. And I have been so proud of him in his ventures to improve his late father’s business. Although I am sure that it has been difficult for him in these past months, he has shown nothing but the utmost strength. Honestly, I find him deeply impressive,” Rue said.

“That is excellent, considering the fact that you are soon to marry him. It would be quite discouraging if you were not impressed by him,” Tess said with a laugh.

“Oh, hush. You need not even mention that possibility. There is nothing about him that I would not find astonishing. He is, in every way, the most wonderful man in all the world,” Rue said.

Once more, Tess’s heart seemed to clench. She detested even allowing the thought, but a part of her knew that she wished she could have this same sort of affection about which Rue was speaking. It was a love that Tess could scarcely imagine, but she was intrigued to think that Rue was fortunate enough to know the love of a man like Lord Haverdell, and he was most devoted to her. There was nothing else in his life that seemed so important.

That companionship was something Tess always sneered at, but now that she was seeing her friend enjoy it, she could not deny that it was

rather tempting. It was as though she was just having a new revelation into what it really would mean to be in love and have the companionship that the majority of women sought after with such earnestness. If there was a real reason for it, if it was indeed something worth having, Tess realised that she might need to consider this more deeply and remind herself that the choice she had made had been made for a reason. She was not the sort of woman to swoon, and she had no desire to allow herself to be taken in by the idea of marriage now.

Indeed, if she could be a bride without having to be a wife, she would be more than happy to give it a go. But as for Rue's hopes, that was not something she would ever allow for herself.

"Now, I understand that you shall be heartily offended by my asking this question, but have you enjoyed your time getting to know Lord Corrington?" Rue asked.

"Lord Corrington?" Tess replied as if she were surprised by the question.

"Yes, it is clear that he has taken a liking to you. I know that you have declared you shall never marry and that your mother and father would insist that you marry none other than Lord Stanton, but you do appear rather comfortable with Lord Corrington. Am I mistaken?" Rue asked.

Tess paused, ready to put on her show. She gazed off in the corner, rather longingly. Rue had heard by now that Lord Corrington had come to pay a call on her, and it was best that she make herself appear as hopeful as possible.

“You need not ask me such things,” she said, with a false embarrassment.

“Oh, dear! Why is that?” Rue asked, her eyes wide with excitement as though she already suspected that Tess had been keeping a secret from her.

“It is far too embarrassing. I fear that I must not say a word on the subject,” Tess said, by manner of enticing Rue to curiosity and eager interest.

“Good heavens! I daresay, are you actually interested in him?” she asked.

“Whatever do you mean, dear Rue?” Tess asked.

“I believe you know precisely what I mean. Are you, Tess Oakley, interested in Lord Milton Eddington, the Duke of Corrington?” Rue asked.

Tess sighed and gave a girls grin, as though too sheepish to answer that, indeed, she was interested. Of course, this was done for no other reason than the show she was trying to put on, but Tess still found herself rather enjoying the moment.

“You do! How wonderful, Tess! You have fallen in love with Lord Corrington?”

“I made no such claim. I simply confess that I am not opposed to his interests and to the courtship which he has incited,” Tess said.

“How strange and remarkable. I am sure that my darling, Lord Haverdell, shall be delighted. To think of the two of you together? Although you both claim to detest the institution of marriage and the idea of love, you have found it with one another,” Rue said.

“Indeed, it is strange. I can hardly say, myself, how it came to pass. But what I have discovered is that the care that I feel towards him is nothing I had ever anticipated. Oh, I cannot even explain it, Rue!” Tess gushed, characterising precisely what she believed she must in order to invoke the nature of a young woman swooning with love.

“When did this happen? I saw the way the two of you behaved with one another at the dinner, but I had no idea that he was so deeply intrigued by you as to call upon you the way he did. Were you surprised? Or had he given you reason to believe that he might do so?” Rue asked.

“He did mention that he might, but I thought he was just being charming. I expected that he likely told all young women that—given his reputation, of course. I never thought he would actually call upon me and show me any sort of care, you see,” Tess replied.

“My goodness, I am entirely happy for you, Tess. It is so marvellous that he has made the decision to show you this affection. A man like the Duke of Corrington does not show his affections to just anyone,” Rue said.

“Of course he does,” Tess laughed. “That is why everyone calls him a rake.”

Rue giggled with her, teasing that he was far too affectionate for the good of any woman. But Tess realized that she was actually doing a very good job of making Rue believe that this little ruse actually meant something.

“You know precisely what I meant by that. He is not a man who honestly cares for women and gives them his heart. That is something he reserves very much for himself. To think that he has shown you this affection is quite grand, I daresay. There is a part of me that cannot help but wonder why he has seen fit to offer you a piece of himself,” Rue said, her eyes searching Tess.

“And why is it so difficult for you to believe that he simply has an interest in me?” she asked, feigning offence.

“Because, as I have told you, he is thoroughly opposed to marriage, just as you are. And while I am greatly amused and delighted to imagine that the two of you have found some common ground and affection for one another, surely you can understand why I struggle to believe it,” Rue said.

“I certainly cannot. All this time, you urge me to find a match, and you tease me, making claims that, one day, I shall find myself in love with a man. And yet, here I am, in the very beginnings of learning to care for someone, and you mock me by saying that you cannot believe it to be true?” Tess asked. She hardly wanted to fight with Rue over something that was all a lie anyway, but it still bothered her that Rue would respond like this. She ought to have simply been happy for Tess.

Rue did, indeed, appear contrite. She looked down and away, nodding

solemnly.

“Yes, you are correct. Forgive me, Tess. I am surprised, that is all. Delighted, but surprised,” she said.

“Very well. I understand. Still, I should not like for you to think of me thusly. I do still have a heart and care, you know,” Tess said.

“I know, my dear Tess. I am sorry if I made you think that I was questioning it,” she replied.

Tess understood and tried to calm herself, to be all right with the conversation they had and the way Rue seemed to think so little of Tess in light of these things. But Tess knew that she was misunderstood. Her lack of interest in marriage was so often considered to be something wrong with her or a great flaw. Tess did not see it this way, but she could not be overly upset by those who did.

“Anyway, aside from my foolishness, I truly wish to hear about your feelings for Lord Corrington. What is it about him that has caused you to consider his courtship?” Rue asked.

“Well,” Tess said, trying to think of something that might make sense and be convincing enough for Rue. “I do appreciate his humour and charm, of course. Now, I know that many young women have been persuaded by him in that regard, and I do hope that you know I am not foolish enough to be caught unawares. It is, of course, possible that he is simply trying to make me another of his conquests, but as that would never happen, and he has followed through on his intention of courting me, I do believe that he is serious,” Tess said.

“That is remarkable. And what else?”

“I find him shockingly handsome,” Tess said, knowing that this, at least, was another truth. He was a rather attractive man, even if she was unaccustomed to allowing herself to notice such things.

“Well, yes. There is no denying that,” Rue said, although Tess knew her to be utterly devoted to her betrothed.

“Aside from this, I appreciate what it is to be misunderstood by society for having feelings other than what most people believe one ought to have. You know, it is strange that we began to speak of our mutual distaste for the things of marriage and then found ourselves getting along very well because of it. So well, in fact, that he sparked an interest in me. And there you have it,” Tess said, hoping this was enough of an explanation.

Of course, Tess felt awful about deceiving Rue. However, she needed everyone to believe that she was in love with Lord Corrington—or at least that she soon would be. It was the only way to protect herself against her mother and father discovering the truth and forcing her to marry Lord Stanton. So it was that she allowed herself to lie to Rue all for the sake of this safety.

“Perhaps you and Lord Corrington shall be married soon after Lord Haverdell and me,” Rue said.

“Indeed, perhaps. I do hope that my mother allows me to be with him as opposed to Lord Stanton. She seemed fond enough of Lord Corrington,” Tess said.

“Why would she not? Lord Corrington is a far better man than Lord Stanton. Besides, he has one very fine thing that Lord Stanton does not,” Rue said.

“Oh?” Tess asked. “And what is that?”

Rue smiled and shrugged, looking Tess directly in the eye.

“He has the approval of the most difficult woman in all of England.”

Chapter 10

Milton was relaxing at his gentleman's club, a brandy in one hand and a few men gambling in front of him. Although Milton and the others were not the ones with the cards, they took bets on who would win the game.

"A farthing on Masterson," Milton said, keeping his bet lower than others. Gambling was not his particular vice, although he enjoyed it now and then. Still, watching these men play their game and look at one another with such intensity and determination, Milton wished that he could get more involved just this once.

Nevertheless, he allowed himself to indulge just a bit as he relaxed among friends and enjoyed their company. James had only just departed due to another appointment, but Milton had no intention of leaving yet. He was far more interested in seeing how the card game played out and whether or not he was right in betting on Lord Daniel Masterson, Earl of Flintley.

However, the game concluded rather abruptly when Lord Stanton entered the room and took the cards straight from the Earl and scoffed.

"Is this the best you are able to do?" he asked mockingly.

The Earl looked at Lord Stanton with a blend of irritation and hate, something Milton could understand, given the circumstances and everything he knew about Lord Stanton. However, there were still others around, and they, too, looked at Lord Stanton with a sense of foreboding and evidently wishing that he was not there with them.

“Ah, if it is not Lord Corrington himself?” Lord Stanton asked, setting his eyes on Milton.

In response, Milton leaned back in a casual posture to show that he was unafraid of Lord Stanton. He showed no respect or formality, simply allowing himself to settle deeper into the chair and be comfortable.

“It is, as a matter of fact. You must forgive me, Lord Stanton, I did not notice you,” he replied, choosing the rather daring option of insulting the man. He could not be bothered enough to care about the repercussions of speaking to Lord Stanton in such a way. The idea of worrying about what Lord Stanton may or may not think of him was an impossibility. After all, when Milton looked at him, all he saw was a coward.

“I would be delighted to make certain that you always know when I am nearby,” Lord Stanton growled.

“Oh? How so?” Milton asked nonchalantly.

“I propose that we play a game of cards,” Lord Stanton said.

“Ha! A game? You really believe that is the best use of our time? After all, we are noblemen, are we not?”

Although Milton had only just been making a wager on two other

noblemen playing, there was something deeply satisfying about making Lord Stanton seethe. He thought, for a moment, that he could not possibly stop himself.

“What is the matter with you?” Lord Stanton asked furiously.

“I am unbothered, my lord. And if you wish a game, I shall not refuse you. What would you like to play?” Milton asked.

He knew that Lord Stanton was challenging him for a far greater reason than enjoying cards. It was a matter of pride. It was a matter of Lord Stanton being one of the most eligible bachelors in all of England —aside from Milton. And he wanted to prove that he was the better man.

Milton had no intention of allowing him to do so.

Lord Stanton had always hated Milton. It had been obvious. Although Milton was unafraid of such hatred, he still found it all rather unpleasant to have to face. Lord Stanton was behaving like a child, as usual, and it was deeply unsavoury in Milton’s eyes.

“Piquet, shall we?” Lord Stanton finally replied, choosing a game that Milton loathed quite openly. It was no secret that he found the game to be a bore despite the great entertainment it seemed to provide others.

“Very well,” he sighed.

Soon enough, the two were on to the game, with Milton cutting the higher card and being the dealer. He dealt twelve cards to each of them, and the game truly began.

From the onset, it was clear that Lord's Stanton's arrogance would be his undoing. He grinned in a terribly cocky manner any time he had a good card, and Milton soon realised that the man was not even intelligent enough to bluff as he played. In return, Milton kept his face steady, allowing a false sense of worry to cross his expression now and again in an effort to make Lord Stanton believe that he was genuinely worried about losing.

But Lord Stanton was certainly happy enough with the cards he had, and they played back and forth until, at last, Milton was declared the clear winner.

"Huzzah!" cried Masterson, who had bet on Milton in return for Milton's choice to bet on him.

"You think this is over with?" Lord Stanton asked angrily. His nostrils were flaring in such a comedic way that Milton had to look away. He knew that laughing at the man would do no one any good at all.

"I highly doubt it," Milton said.

"Good. So you do have some sense about you? Very well, we must play another round," Lord Stanton declared, clearly unwilling to accept that he had lost.

Once more, they played, and Milton could see that Lord Stanton was deeply proud of himself whenever he had good cards. The problem, however, was that Milton was having dreadful luck. He could not seem to get the cards he was looking for and knew that he was unlikely to win this time. The last thing he wanted was to be as poor a sport as Lord Stanton by throwing a tantrum in the face of loss, but he also desperately hoped to succeed in his efforts.

Unfortunately, the game took a turn for the worse and Milton's cards could not match up to those of Lord Stanton. Milton's talon was missing what he needed to make any sort of victory appear, and he had to secede to Lord Stanton in the end.

"Aha! So, you see? It is not a matter of you being a better player than I. You happened to have been lucky the first time, but my skill inevitably prevailed," Lord Stanton said, trying to make himself appear better in the eyes of everyone present.

"Well, I am deeply happy for you. It must be a rather difficult life, needing to win at a card game simply to prove that you are a man of any kind," Milton said, hoping the insult struck.

It did.

Lord Stanton seethed once more, and Milton finally waved away his fury.

"Please calm down, Lord Stanton. I shall give you a chance to play once more and prove a final time that you are a better player than I," Milton said, not caring at all who won and who lost. He was bothered only by the fact that Lord Stanton was so determined to break him down through something as trivial as cards. Milton was confident he

could not be so wounded by something like this.

“If you are brave enough and you do not mind being seen as an utter and complete failure, I would be more than happy to play you again,” Lord Stanton said.

“Excellent. Thank you. Please have a turn in dealing,” Milton said, offering up the responsibility.

“Thank you,” Lord Stanton said, although he did not appear thankful at all. Instead, he wrathfully dealt, and the two faced off a final time, waiting to see who might win and who might prove to be the better player.

At last, Lord Stanton appeared deeply frustrated as he declared, “Carte blanche,” through a grumbling voice.

Milton set out the cards for him to pick, and the game continued on until the six hands had been played in the third game and, at last, Milton was declared the final winner.

Lord Stanton seethed as the men in the club cheered Milton on, giving him plenty of attention for his triumph. He hardly even noticed their praise for how angry Lord Stanton was, but he made every effort to engage in their congratulatory words.

“Thank you, thank you,” Milton said, accepting every bit of it and watching Lord Stanton turn red with anger.

Although Milton was not the sort of man to enjoy the suffering of another, he found that he hardly minded this. After all, Lord Stanton was a terrible man. Although Milton would never sink so low as to urge Lord Stanton on in something like this, he could not help but be amused to see how this arrogant man had failed so deeply. There was no reason at all to feel bad for the petty man.

But the anger and disgust in Lord Stanton's eyes was astonishing to Milton, something he had scarcely seen from a man in all his life. To think that he was the object of another man's hatred was a rather new experience. However, to be in this position was enough to remind Milton that he was going to have a bit of a struggle as he pursued the image of courting Lady Oakley.

Lord Stanton would never forgive him for trying to court her. Nor would he forget the fact that Lady Oakley was using this as a means of refusing him. It was a terribly unique incident, and Milton was not sure whether he ought to relish it or fight against it.

But Lord Stanton finally stood and gave Milton a bow as a sign of submitting to his own defeat. That, in itself, was a shock but certainly a good thing. It showed Milton that even Lord Stanton was wise enough not to continue going on in foolishness about his own abilities. This brief battle was over, and that was something.

Without another word, Lord Stanton departed from the room, leaving Milton and the others excited about the victory. As Milton sat there, receiving the praise of his friends and hearing a few comments about how Lord Stanton deserved to lose, Milton wondered why Lady Oakley's parents actually believed that she ought to be with a man like this. After all, he did not have a good reputation, nor was he the sort of man that anyone truly liked or thought well of. If anything, he had a dreadful reputation and would only drag the Oakley family down with him.

Nevertheless, it was clear that, despite their disagreements on abolition, Lord Daleshire and Lord Henbridge were close enough to make a match of their children. It was a match that was just now beginning to bother Milton a great deal more than he cared to admit. And if he was in such a position of being so bothered, he could hardly imagine how Lady Oakley felt on the matter or what it must be like for her to accept that her father was willing to trade her off so easily.

Indeed, Milton understood that it would be better for her if their little ruse was genuine and if they actually had some kind of a match between them. Of course, that was nonsense and would never come to pass, but that did not mean he couldn't think about it and consider that they would be happy with one another.

But their marriage could not be a typical one. If they ever took that step in order to have their mutual freedom, it would be a marriage in which Lady Oakley was free to live her life as she wished, and Milton would have to find another outlet for his flirtations so that he could still have a bit of freedom while not disrespecting his wife.

And yet, if he was married to someone, there would be no need for the flirtations.

So many people believed him a rake because they thought he had no ability to settle with a woman or that he was simply the worst of flirts. What they did not realise, however, was the truth. No one knew why he was so adamant in his refusal to marry or the concerns that ran deep in his veins about the woman he might be with.

No, he could not do that to Lady Oakley. He would never put her through the suffering she would face if he were to marry her.

“I told you that old boy was a fool,” Masterson said, coming over to Milton and bringing him from his thoughts.

“Yes, well, I would not wish to speak ill of my card rival, but I do believe that he could have handled it better to be bested,” Milton said.

“One of these days, that man’s arrogance is going to throw him down, and he shall not even know what has happened. I trust that the day will come, and I hope that I am present to see it,” Masterson said.

“We must not think so ill of our enemies, Masterson. They, too, are men with flaws. As are we,” Milton said.

“Not like him. Look at me. I am wealthy, titled, charming. I may not be as wealthy as he or have his looks, but that hardly makes me less of a man. And yet, I would never behave as he does. What has caused him to be so cruel and unpleasant?” Masterson asked.

“I do believe that he is a product of his father. You know that Lord Henbridge is very much the same kind of man. If he allows his son to behave in this way, who is to blame?” Milton asked.

“I still blame Lord Stanton. No man who respects himself ought to behave like that,” Masterson said.

Milton could not refute that idea, but he did not wish to say it so openly. After all, now that he was pursuing the same young woman as Lord Stanton, it could look rather strange if he was going about

speaking ill of the man. Even if he detested Lord Stanton, he had to maintain a modicum of respect for the sake of his own image.

“Well, be that as it may, I have hope that there shall be something good ahead for us and that he shall one day face the consequences of his pride. For now, let us just be happy that I have bested him for the moment and that I maintain my ability to infuriate him,” Milton said with an amused grin.

“Here, here,” Masterson said, raising his glass of brandy and handing Milton a fresh one. They toasted and drank, their celebration drowned out by the noise of a dozen other men fighting to play the next round of cards.

Milton was aware of the fact that things might change for him in the midst of this rivalry with Lord Stanton, but a part of him didn’t care. After all, Lady Oakley deserved to have a say in who she married. And, for some strange reason, Milton was eager to protect that choice.

Chapter 11

Tess was finally ready just in time for Lord Corrington to arrive at the estate. She was eager for her mother to be ready and presentable as well, but what surprised Tess the most was that she was actually quite looking forward to seeing him. For some strange reason, she was excited by the idea of spending time with him and getting to know him better once more. Even though there was no reason and their entire courtship was a lie, she realised that she did enjoy spending time with him, and she felt they got along quite well.

"All right, my dear, he has arrived," her mother said, rushing to pin a loose strand of hair from Tess's head.

"Yes, Mother, I saw the carriage out the window. I am trying to be quick about getting ready," she said. "This was all I had left."

"Well, I've got the last strand here. There you are, all pinned up. Now that you look absolutely breathtaking, I have no doubt that Lord Corrington shall be ready to swoon," her mother said.

"I am glad to hear it, Mother," Tess replied.

"But, my dear, I hope you understand how important today is," her mother said.

"Is each day not important, Mother?"

“My girl, today is important because it is the day in which you must make a decision,” her mother said.

Tess faltered, and her breath caught. How could her mother be asking her to make a decision already? That made no sense at all. After all, she was still trying to discern exactly what to do. If she openly chose Lord Corrington now, they would need to work together to delay the actual wedding and ensure that it was delayed long enough that she would not then be forced back to Lord Stanton upon ending this courtship.

She had hoped to have a longer season of being courted by both men so that she might be able to frustrate Lord Stanton into giving up entirely. That way, when she and Lord Corrington eventually ended their courtship, there would be no reason for Lord Stanton to come back to her and beg her to rekindle the romance he sought.

However, there was nothing Tess could do. If her mother was giving her the choice, she would have to make it. Unless, of course, her mother was malleable. Perhaps, Tess could manipulate the situation. Although she never wanted to be the sort of girl who played with the feelings of others, she was desperate to keep her own independence and did not think that this would harm her mother. Indeed, she needed to make a choice.

“Mother, do you mean that I must end a courtship with one man or the other? I had thought it best if I give them each more time,” she said.

Her mother appeared somewhat frustrated by that.

“Well, you must at least decide if you wish to allow Lord Corrington to pursue this match. If you would like to continue getting to know him. I know that it would be rather difficult to bring it to an immediate conclusion. However, you must understand that Lord Stanton is waiting for you. He cares for you a great deal,” her mother said.

“Yes, Mother, I know that. And I do not wish to disappoint Lord Stanton, but you know that I do not love him. I simply need to decide if Lord Corrington is important enough to me that I ought to pursue the match with him. The problem, Mother, is that I do not know him well enough yet. I ask you for just a little while longer. I know that Lord Stanton shall discover this courtship, but I also believe that it is going to be very good for our family,” she said.

“Our family? How?” her mother asked.

“Think about it, Mother. If your daughter is being courted by not just one but two of the most eligible bachelors in all of England, do you not think that it would paint our family in a positive light?” Tess asked.

Her mother appeared to chew on that thought for a moment before giving a single nod of approval.

“Very well. You have persuaded me. Now, we must get downstairs before he is forced to wait for too long,” her mother said.

Relieved that she had managed to delay the process, Tess followed her mother down the stairs and into the sitting room where Lord Corrington was already awaiting them.

“Ah, good afternoon,” he said, standing and bowing, a hat in his hands. He looked quite the gentleman, and those striking, blue eyes met Tess’s eyes in a moment that sent something of a shock through her.

“Lord Corrington, how marvellous to see you. Would you like to sit and have a bit of tea, or do you prefer to walk in the gardens and then come back for the tea?” Tess asked.

Lord Corrington looked between her and her mother. Tess could read in his eyes what he was thinking. If they sat for tea, her mother would hear every word to pass between them. If they walked in the gardens, however, she would be far enough behind them that they might have a moment to speak without the prying ears of another. The choice was clear.

“I certainly fancy a walk if it would be agreeable to the both of you,” he said.

“Yes, yes, we must walk,” her mother said, apparently eager to give them time together as well so that they might grow closer to one another.

Lord Corrington’s station as a duke appeared to give him a bit of prominence in Tess’s mother’s eyes. This was a great fortune in that it meant she would be more inclined to give Tess a chance to make something of this courtship over that with Lord Stanton.

As Tess and Lord Corrington walked outside, she realised just how fortunate she was to be with him in that moment. He was a bright,

interesting man. Indeed, they really could come to be friends, she thought. There had never been another man in her life with whom she sought a friendship, but he was different from most, and that was a comfort.

“Lady Oakley, I have a confession to make,” he said.

“Oh? What might that be?”

“I may have unintentionally—well, somewhat intentionally—embarrassed the other gentleman who is interested in courting you,” he said.

Tess looked at him with wide eyes and a hint of a grin, wanting to know more. What had he done? She hated to admit that she was so interested in learning what had happened, but a small part of her was excited to hear this news, even if she was ashamed of that part of her.

“He challenged me to a game of cards, and I admit that I was less than gentlemanly. I did not cheat, of course, but I won, and I was not displeased to have done so,” he said.

“Nor should you be. If you won a game of cards, it is because you were the better man. I assume he did not take kindly to the success you found?” she asked.

“No, I fear that he did not. Of course, I cannot blame him. He is not the sort of man who loses easily, but I still wish that I had been a little better than I was. As it is, I was unkind to him, allowing him to suffer in his rage,” Lord Corrington said with a chuckle.

“Well, I am certain that you had every reason to do as you did. He is a very proud man, and I expect that he was not willing to lose with grace,” Tess said.

“Well, grace or no grace, he did lose to me,” Lord Corrington said. “I fear how it is going to look once he learns that I am making an effort to court you.”

“Are you worried that he shall do something to harm you?” she asked in surprise.

“Oh, heavens no. He is far too cowardly to request a duel or any such thing. What worries me is that I am going to appear as petty as he. I should not like it if others believe that I am the same as him, you understand,” he said.

“No one would ever think that. You are a very different man, and that is no secret,” she replied.

“Well, I do appreciate your saying that, but I would not like to put it to the test. I think it would be far better if I am subtle in how I take you from him,” Lord Corrington said with a laugh.

“Yes, as you seek to ruin the happy romance that exists between myself and Lord Stanton, society shall see the rake fall into a deep affection,” Tess replied, her voice dripping with sarcasm and making him laugh all over again.

“You are quite a whit,” he said.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I do try,” she replied with a shrug.

For a moment, their eyes met, and Tess’s stomach fluttered with a strange hope. She quickly pushed it away and looked onward, focusing on the path through the flowers and shrubs, pretending to notice this or that and how lovely the butterflies were. The conversation shifted into meaningless drivel, just as it would if she were truly being courted and trying to impress a man with her delicacy.

“I do love the rose bushes for their smell,” she said as they walked past.

“And yet, I have the strangest feeling that you are not truly the sort of woman who spends her time daydreaming about flowers and romantics. Will you speak to me again about things that matter?” he asked.

Tess was taken aback. She was surprised to realise that Lord Corrington did not like this version of her, the simple one who tried to focus on simple things. Instead, he wanted to see her for who she really was and what sort of woman she might be. Something about that was comforting. Not only had he charmed her a great deal, but it was possible that he truly respected her. She had never really experienced that before.

“My lady!” came a sudden cry from up near the estate.

Tess turned and saw a maid racing after Tess's mother. It was not an overly dignified scene, and Tess imagined that the maid would be scolded later for presenting herself in that way with Lord Corrington present. Still, Tess was intrigued as to why the maid was in such a state, looking frenzied and anxious. She rushed to Tess's mother and quickly whispered something in confidence, her eyes wide with horror.

For a moment, Tess worried that something had happened to her father, but when she saw her own mother's expression shift, she knew that could not be it.

Her mother gasped, her eyes going wide as well. She looked up at Tess and between Tess and Lord Corrington. Everyone was frozen, save for her mother's head moving from one to the other and back again.

Then, in a swift motion, she grasped her skirts and with a shockingly delicate, rapid pace, she made her way to Tess and Lord Corrington. Her stiff smile betrayed the anxiety behind her demeanour, and Tess waited with bated breath to hear what had just taken place.

"Lord Corrington, Your Grace, and my darling Tess, I do fear that we must make our way inside for the tea. It appears as though another guest has decided to join us," she said, steadying her breathing.

Tess wasn't sure who it could possibly be, but after a moment and looking at her mother's panicked face, she finally figured it out.

"Oh, dear," she said.

“If the two of you would follow me, I do believe that Lord Stanton is awaiting us in the parlour,” she said.

Lord Corrington sucked in a strained breath, and Tess glanced at him with worry. He looked back at her, and they both appeared as though they had been caught somehow. Nevertheless, they followed Tess’s mother inside and made their way down the hall to the parlour.

Tess’s mother entered first, greeted Lord Stanton, followed by Tess. She saw his expression light upon seeing her and then fall in dismay when he beheld Lord Corrington. It was only a moment before the dismay was full of anger, which Lord Stanton clearly worked hard to suppress as quickly as he was able.

“Well, it would appear as though I was not the only man to consider coming by today,” Lord Stanton said.

“No, indeed. Lord Corrington also wished to pay us a visit,” Tess’s mother said.

“I was not aware that Lord Corrington was acquainted with your family. How … interesting,” he said.

“Yes, Lord Corrington is a rather new acquaintance, but we are not displeased by it. After all, he is from a most distinguished family, just as ours is. I do hope, Lord Stanton, that you would be so kind as to join us for tea?” Tess’s mother offered.

“Indeed, I should like that very much,” he said.

“Very well, very well,” she replied.

Everyone sat down quickly, and Tess was sure that there was going to be a great deal of rage exchanged between the two men—primarily from Lord Stanton. He was seething, and it was visible to all who were able to look past the false smile on his face. Tess couldn’t imagine what he might do to Lord Corrington if they were not all there in polite company as it was. He would likely have made every effort to come against Lord Corrington.

“How nice to have you both here, gentlemen. Tess, my dear, will you not play a tune for the men?” her mother asked, laughing nervously.

Tess swallowed and nodded. She hated to play the pianoforte but understood that it would break the chilly tension in the room. She wished to remain calm, but it was clear that there was more between them than a bad card game and the fact that they were both courting Tess. It was clear that the two men simply hated one another. For better or worse, there was an ugliness.

She sat at the pianoforte and opened a music book, hoping that she would not make a mistake as she played. The maid brought tea for the others, and Tess began to pluck out a rather jaunty tune, hoping that it would liven up the room and break a bit of the anger she had noted. Her mother cleared her throat as if to scold her for not playing something delicate and beautiful, but Tess wasn’t sure what else to do.

She, a woman who determined never to marry, was stuck in a room with two men. One of those men wished to control her. The other had no interest whatsoever. And, much to her chagrin, it was the latter who was beginning to steal her heart.

Chapter 12

It was clear that word had gotten around about Milton courting Lady Oakley. Not only was he being eyed and chuckled at by acquaintances in the street, but he was also constantly being told that he was a brave man—brave or foolish, that is. However, no matter what others were saying, Milton was glad that he had done something to help Lady Oakley and give her a chance to get out of this dreadful arrangement she had with Lord Stanton.

Making her suffer through that was just awful, and he couldn't imagine how she might be able to overcome the fact that she was being forced to marry a man like him if her mother and father decided that he was a better match for her than Milton was. Worse still, what if they ended the courtship just in time for Lord Stanton to come back to her? Milton had a great deal of trouble to consider in this respect.

By the time he arrived at the club once more, he was being praised by all manner of men who were glad that he was taking a stand to finally put Lord Stanton down. While this had not been his true intention, he understood why all these other gentlemen were so happy and so proud of him. The vast majority of them had been hurt or frustrated by Lord Stanton at one time or another. After all, he was a truly dreadful man.

"There he is!" Lord Wilkins exclaimed, coming over and patting Milton on the back as he entered the club. "We all heard the news. You know, Lord Stanton is likely to challenge you to a duel after this. You are one brave man for putting yourself into this position."

"Well, what can I say? I love the girl. There is nothing more to be done about it," Milton said with a laugh.

“Ha! Did you hear that, gentlemen? He loves the girl! Who would have thought that Lord Milton Eddington, the Duke of Corrington, might fall in love? A rake like him? Have we not all protected our daughters and sisters from him at one time or another?” He chuckled.

The other men nearby joined in the laughter, and Milton was suddenly very uncomfortable. Yes, he had a plan with Tess, but this was just strange. And now, his reputation was preceding him in a way that he was not happy about. Milton disliked that no one took him seriously, thinking him simply a fool for his tendency to flirt and bounce from one woman to the next without a care. He could hardly blame them for feeling that way.

But he had not expected the incident with Lord Stanton at the estate. That had been quite a shock, and Milton was still unsure how he felt about the entire matter. After all, he wanted to keep Lady Oakley happy and continue on in their plan, but he was not eager to see to it that he ruin his own reputation in the process. Besides, he truly did not wish for her to get hurt. Lord Stanton was a bitter man and could be just the sort to make certain that she was made a fool of due to this insult.

“Goodness gracious, I do not know how you have had the guts to do it, but I wish I had,” Lord Pennyworth said. “That woman is a stunning creature. If I had thought there was a chance to push the old dog out of the way and make my move on her, I would have done so in a heartbeat.”

Milton tried to smile, although he disliked thinking about Lady Oakley in this way.

“Well, I could hardly help myself,” he said.

“Tell me, do you really care for her? After all, you have such a reputation. She must truly be something special if you would give up everything you have long-since chased in order to be with this woman,” Lord Pennyworth said.

“Indeed, and I know that some may question my sudden inability to refrain from having such an affection, but I assure you that she is absolutely the woman with whom I would like to spend my days. She is rather remarkable,” he said.

“Are you certain you are not only saying so because she is beautiful?” Lord Pennyworth asked.

“Her beauty is only one aspect of who she is; a lovely one, to be sure, but only one. I trust you shall be patient with me as we court and as I learn whether or not she cares for me to the same extent which I care for her,” Milton said.

“Oh, very well, very well,” he said before turning to the other men. “Shall we give up a cheer for our dear Lord Corrington? The man who showed up Lord Stanton!”

“To Lord Corrington!” they all shouted, raising their glasses.

Milton was relieved that Lord Stanton was not present. He may not have been so willing to accept this strange display in Milton’s favour. And after the way the previous day ended, what with Lord Stanton quickly departing after tea and giving Milton a threatening gaze, he had no desire to push things any further. He expected they would be

pushed enough without his aid.

As Milton's friends cheered him on and showed their support, he tried to play it off as though it was nothing at all. And yet, he was frustrated to recognise that he actually enjoyed spending time with Lady Oakley. She was surprisingly intriguing, and he found that he really did like the way they interacted and how she made him feel about things. Even if he could not quite understand why, he was glad that she seemed to care about a friendship with him as well.

But Milton was eager to forget about it. He was not going to allow his heart to be moved. He had chosen what sort of man he wanted to be, and there was nothing that would happen to change that.

He could not marry anyone. It was impossible. No matter what he may want or what would shift in his heart, he was aware of the fact that this simply could not be done, and he would not give in to whatever silly notions were trying to work their way into his mind.

He and Lady Oakley had an arrangement. That was all that mattered, and they would stick with it, regardless of whatever rumours of other things might be shared. And even if his own heart was betraying him, Milton had made a firm enough decision to ensure that he and Lady Oakley would remain in one another's confidence.

"Oh dear, oh dear," James said, coming and sitting beside Milton with a glass of brandy.

"I was not aware that you were here," Milton said.

“I can see that you are quite distracted. And I cannot say that I blame you for that. After all, you are certainly a madman if you have done what everyone is saying you have done,” James said.

“Please, do not speak of it like that. I have done nothing wrong. Simply, I am trying to live the life I wish as I wish it. I never expected that I would find a young woman who might mean something to me, but here I am. Are you not always the one urging me to find someone and settle?” he asked.

“Indeed, I often have, but this is rather different from what I might have anticipated. After all, were there no women out there who were still currently available to you? What possessed you to pursue someone already being courted by that man of them all?” James asked.

“Can I help that I have grown fond of her or that she has grown fond of me? Besides, they were not engaged, you see,” Milton said.

“Not yet, but everyone was expecting it to happen very soon. In fact, many men would have loved to have stepped in and taken her from Lord Stanton had you not done it first. They simply did not think it wise to do such a thing when Lord Stanton holds grudges like none other,” James said.

“Be that as it may, I cannot stop myself from caring for the woman. She is certainly unique,” Milton said.

“Perhaps it is because the two of you are rather similar in many ways. Regardless, I shall not cease to think you a fool for engaging the wrath of Lord Stanton as you have,” James declared with a shrug.

“I am not frightened by the man. I am confident in my own ability and awareness of myself that I might be able to escape his incessant childishness. You need not worry a jot about me, James. I assure you that I am perfectly well and able to maintain myself and keep that man at bay,” he said.

“Very well, then. You know better than I, I suppose. Still, I should like to see to it that you and that man are not at odds for long. Certainly, I should be unhappy to hear that you might be subject to his violent demeanour,” James said.

“Is he violent?” Milton asked, surprised. He had not heard such a thing before.

“I mean his nature. Whether or not he has enacted violence, I cannot say. What I have seen from him, however, is that he is a truly awful man, and that is not difficult for one to surmise,” James said.

“No, indeed, it is not, I suppose. He is a rather unlikeable man, but it does not change that I should like to see him make the wise choice to not be so angry about everything and simply accept that I am here and I care for Lady Oakley,” Milton said, seeing that James believed every word of it.

Milton felt bad about the lie, but he understood that it was necessary. James had to believe that all of this was true and genuine, even if it was a farce. But if James did not believe the ruse, he might allow the truth to slip, and others would realise that it was all a lie as well. Then, Milton and Lady Oakley would both be in grave trouble.

Instead of confessing to James, Milton needed to make every effort to continue the charade, hoping that no one might be curious and suspect that he and Lady Oakley were involved in this little scheme of theirs.

They would only need to put on the show for a short time, after all. Even if there was no reason to worry about how they might end the courtship, Milton wanted to be sure that all questions were put to rest in regards to his relationship with Lady Oakley. To have anyone doubt them would be very unfortunate as there was truly so much still at risk for them.

But Milton needed to be sure that James was not the only one who believed them. He had to ensure that all of society thought they were a true match. After all, if society did not believe the lie, who would?

Lord Stanton needed it most of all, however. As Milton found himself growing more and more intrigued by Lady Oakley, he was beginning to think about what it might mean for him to be near to her. It was already becoming rather difficult, and he did not wish to face any further confusion in that arena. After all, it was unfortunate to think of what it could be like for him to fall for her if she maintained her determination to never marry.

“Care for a game?” Milton asked James, looking at the chessboard on the table. He wanted to be distracted from his thoughts of Lady Oakley, and if he was supposed to convince James that he cared for her, it was only going to make it all the more difficult to hold firm to his commitment.

“Always,” James replied, grabbing the pieces and beginning to arrange them.

Milton turned himself so that he was seated properly at the table across from James, ready to play. It was evident that James had already moved on in his thoughts, looking at the game before them as opposed to dwelling further on the matter. This was a great relief to Milton, who was more than ready to move on and think of other things.

“There we are. I believe you are to go first,” James said.

Milton eyed the board for a moment before he picked up a white pawn and moved it one space forward.

“How kind of you to begin with the simplest of moves,” James said.

“How else am I meant to begin?” Milton asked. Chess was not his expertise, and he knew only the rudimentary steps of the game. James, on the other hand, was well-known for his skill. Immediately, Milton regretted having suggested the match.

James went easy on him at first, moving the pieces slowly and methodically in a way that seemed simple enough. Milton pushed his pawns out, losing only a few of them and taking in turn. At one moment, James was very close to his king, and he took steps to prevent the potential loss. But then, without warning, James was suddenly beside Milton’s queen.

“How did you get there?” Milton asked.

“Ah, my friend, that is a terrible question to ask,” James said. “But it

is a reasonable one. Still, for a man like you—a man not inclined to chess—it must be difficult to attempt to play the game. After many years of telling me that you cared not a bit about making an effort to play well, that it was unimportant to you, you now find yourself lost to the game."

Milton read the warning under James's words. He was not speaking of chess and Milton's lack of interest. He was speaking of Milton's history with women and the fact that he had no care for marriage and the like.

"What of it?" he asked James, trying to challenge him back.

"Only that it is something to remember. When suddenly put in a position of playing a new game, a man must always have one priority, a far greater priority than we at first expect," James said.

Milton took a deep breath and sighed.

"And what priority is that?" he asked.

James took Milton's queen, and there was no one left to protect the king. James had clearly won the game. He looked up at Milton with intensity in his eyes.

"A man must always protect his queen."

Chapter 13

The carriage arrived, and Tess waited for the coachman to open the door. She stepped out and looked up at the grand manor where the evening's ball would be held.

"Do not forget that you are a distinguished lady. There may be rumours about you now that you are being courted by two of England's most fantastical bachelors," her mother said.

"I know, Mother. I shall not give the rumours a moments' consideration. I understand our position in society, and I would never bring you shame by allowing another gentleman to think that there is something about me which might invite attention," she said.

"Very well. I am glad to hear it. Now, hurry along. You know as well as I do that the men out there who are so eager to see you are probably also ready to murder one another," her mother grumbled.

"Oh, Mother, do not be so dramatic," Tess said.

"Dramatic? You think me dramatic? On the contrary, it is clear that these gentlemen see you as a conquest, and they each wish to remove their competitor. I would be deeply grieved to find that either of them should behave as shockingly in public as they did in our home," her mother said.

"They were both rather uncomfortable, to be sure, but I am not certain that it is so bad as you think," Tess said.

“I thought they would duel over you then and there. You, my very own daughter,” her mother said with great pride.

It was clear to Tess that her mother found it rather distinguished to have her daughter so sought after as she had been in the past few days. Tess, however, merely considered the fact that her mother was unaware of the arrangement which Tess and Lord Corrington had made. All of the hopes for men to duel over her were for not. There was no reason Lord Corrington might risk his life for a woman he cared nothing for. She was not so foolish as to see it any other way.

“Come, join me,” her mother said, holding out her arm for Tess to take.

They walked into the estate together and saw many men and women mingling about. They looked rather grand, the lot of them. Tess realised that there were some truly lovely women there, and a small part of her instantly hoped that Lord Stanton might be so distracted by one of the other ladies that he would forget about Tess entirely.

“Ah, there is your man. Go to him. Quickly. No! Wait. I changed my mind. He must come to you.”

The words came fast from Tess’s mother, and she turned to see Lord Corrington nearby. As if he had been drawn by her mother’s declarations, he looked at her from halfway across the room and made his way over in a hurry.

“Oh, Lord Corrington, how lovely to see you,” her mother greeted. “I

had no idea that you were here already. *We* did not have any idea, no, not at all."

The dramatically overdone attempts by her mother to reassure him that they had not just been speaking of him was rather painful for Tess to watch, but Lord Corrington showed mercy, behaving as though he'd had no idea that she was lying at all.

"Well, I am glad to say that I am here, and it is delightful to see the both of you. Tell me, are you well?" he asked.

"Quite well, Your Grace, thank you," Tess replied. He smiled at her in that devouring way, and she felt the flutters all over again but ignored them promptly.

"Would you care for a dance, Lady Oakley?" he asked, offering his arm.

"I should like that very much, Your Grace," she replied.

"Well, only if it is all right with your dear mother," he said, correcting himself and turning to Tess's mother for permission.

"Certainly, certainly," she said.

"Thank you, Lady Daleshire. And I do hope that you shall keep a space open on your card for me later in the evening," he said to Tess's mother in a deeply charming manner.

“Oh! Goodness me,” she said with a girlish giggle.

As Tess and Lord Corrington turned from her mother, who was practically swooning over him and his flattery, Tess could not help but grin and shake her head.

“You truly must charm every last woman in the room, mustn’t you?” she teased.

“If a woman is to be my mother-in-law one day, yes. I must charm her,” he said.

Tess quickly turned her face to him in shock, and he looked at her with the same sudden moment of embarrassment at his own words. His cheeks grew red, and he stuttered for a moment before finding an explanation.

“What I mean to say is that I wish for everyone here to believe that I have intentions of marrying you and for your mother to be my mother-in-law. Of course, I meant it only for the sake of our act,” he said desperately.

“I see…” she replied.

“Yes, yes, you must forgive me. I can see that I frightened you by not explaining myself well,” he said.

“No, I understand. I know that it is difficult to put on a show as we are and recall that we may speak freely with one another about our intentions,” Tess said. And yet, she could not explain why it bothered her so much to have him rush to defend himself against any idea of caring for her. Still, she knew their plan and did not wish to make him uncomfortable by questioning it now.

“Yes, thank you for understanding. I truly did not mean to give you such a pause for discomfort. I know that it must be difficult for you as well because you are still being forced to be courted by another, and yet, you wish to make others believe that there is something between us,” he said.

Tess tried to focus on the task at hand and on the fact that they were working hard to convince others of this match that she was trying to portray. As Lord Corrington took her out onto the dance floor, she made herself as graceful as possible.

“I believe we are being watched,” he said.

“Is that so?” she asked as he spun her in a circle with the music.

“Indeed, it is. There are many eyes upon us just now,” he said.

“And why do you believe that is? Am I considered an impossible girl, and you a rake? And now that we have found one another, in their eyes, do you believe they think some scandal shall come of it?” she asked.

“You say that as if it were not true,” he said.

“What do you mean? There is no scandal here,” she said.

“There would be if our lie was discovered,” he said.

That was certainly true, and Tess did not like to think about it. But he was right. There would be quite a scandal if anyone learned that they were faking this entire arrangement, and it would only serve to make things far worse with Lord Stanton. Tess was not sure what to do about it all, but she hoped that they could keep the secret long enough to push aside any doubts which may be had by others in society. All it would take was a little bit of persuading that they truly cared for one another.

“I must say, however, that you look quite ravishing this evening,” Lord Corrington remarked.

Tess took a deep breath and straightened her posture. She did not wish to hear such things. Any form of genuine flirtation from Lord Corrington was only going to serve to make things more difficult for her just now, and she did not need that. What she needed was peace.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she said.

“Have I made you angry?” he asked.

“Not in the least. Only I wish that you would not share such sentiments with me,” she said.

“Why not?” he asked in confusion, those blue eyes boring into Tess.

“Because I find it confusing, and I wish to know that we are on the same terms,” she said, trying to convince herself as much as him.

He smiled gently and nodded.

“Forgive me, Lady Oakley. You are correct. I ought to have remembered myself better than that,” he said.

They continued to dance, but rather than speaking, they were either end of a tether, joined together by broken glances and beating hearts. Tess tried to shut her own heart away, but she could not ignore it no matter what she tried. And when the dance came to an end, and Lord Corrington let go of her hands, she thought she might break.

“Thank you for the dance, Lady Oakley,” he said.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she replied.

He smiled and walked away from her, heading straight for her mother to fulfil his promise to dance with her. Although nothing, in particular, had happened aside from her small request, Tess felt as though something had changed, as though there was a sudden tension between them. Had she offended him somehow?

But he still smiled at her, and Tess could not imagine what might have been said to upset him. After all, was he not devoted to making this lie believable? Had she placed too much pressure on him and restricted him from being allowed to be his rakish self with her because of the attempts to look like a promising couple?

Soon enough, the dance with her mother came to an end and, as Tess stood near the refreshments, she was relieved when Lord Corrington came back over to her.

“Well, I do believe your mother is now set on the future of us,” he said.

“Excellent,” Tess replied. “It is very important that she should believe we are a match.”

“Indeed, and I daresay she believes it. After all, she just spent a good amount of time speaking with me as though we are already family,” he said with a laugh.

“Is that so?” Tess asked.

“It is. And I am glad that she thinks as much because it is going to make things far easier for us as we move forward. I hope that many people believe we are a match, and it seems as though they do. Now, here we are; we must work hard to show them,” he said.

They walked the room with one another, looking quite the perfect couple. Tess was charmed to be paraded about by him, although she saw the jealousy in the eyes of many young women and could not help wondering whether or not he had been with any of them. Perhaps they were former lovers of his. If so, was she just the next fool in line?

But Tess was mostly relieved that Lord Stanton had not yet arrived. Otherwise, she expected, he would step in quickly and take her from Lord Corrington, which would be utterly distressing. Any moment in which she was subjected to that man was perfectly awful, and Tess had no desire to give him a chance to treat her as though she was his creature—the way he so often tried.

“Ah, there is James—forgive me, Lord Haverdell, I mean,” he said.

“Yes, we must go to him,” Tess agreed. She had not yet seen Rue but expected that Lord Haverdell would know when she was to arrive.

“Good evening,” Lord Corrington greeted.

“Ah, good evening to the both of you. You look absolutely splendid together. I am thrilled to see you both this evening, and I am certain that my lovely betrothed shall be as well. I expect her to be here at any moment,” he said.

“I am glad to hear that,” Tess replied. “I know she was looking forward to the evening.”

“Indeed, indeed. She was at that,” Lord Haverdell said,

absentmindedly searching for Rue in the crowd. Tess was charmed by his affection for the woman he loved most.

“Well, I am glad that you made it. The musicians are excellent, you know,” Lord Corrington said.

“Ah, yes, I have heard them already. They are. However, they are no match to the choir we are to have at our wedding,” he said.

“Of course not,” Tess replied.

“Oh, goodness, I expect that the two of you shall not follow long behind us in needing a splendid wedding choir,” Lord Haverdell said with a laugh.

Tess’s cheeks grew warm, but when she looked at Lord Corrington, she saw panic cross his expression. Clearly, the idea of marriage to her was abhorrent. He did not appear to like the thought of it at all, and Tess could not help being somewhat bothered.

“Well, if you will both excuse me for just a moment,” Lord Corrington said, taking his leave of Tess and Lord Haverdell.

She wasn’t sure what she had done wrong, but watching Lord Corrington go in such a hurry was clearly a sign that something was wrong. She could not help but allow her eyes to linger on his frame until it disappeared out the door.

“What the devil was that all about?” Lord Haverdell asked.

“I fear that I have no idea,” Tess replied solemnly.

“Ah, there is my stunning peach!” Lord Haverdell exclaimed as Rue drew near to them.

“My darling,” she greeted him in reply before turning to Tess. “Oh, dear, Tess. Is something the matter?”

“Hmm?” Tess asked, turning to her.

“Has something happened?”

“No, nothing at all,” she said. “I was distracted by the musicians, that is all. You were correct, Lord Haverdell. They are good, but they do not match the choir that shall sing at your wedding. Still, I do think a choir is not fit for a ball, and this is a better choice for the evening.”

“True, true,” Lord Haverdell said.

But Tess’s thoughts were elsewhere, and when she saw Lord Corrington return to the room in the company of a stunning woman, perhaps a year or two younger than Tess, she began to wonder what more was ahead for her. Was there further heartache? Was there something she could not imagine, to begin with?

Tess took a deep breath and tried to focus on the ball. However, she watched for the next three dances as Lord Corrington traipsed around with other young ladies, and not a single man was willing to come near her—the woman who was already being pursued by two grand noblemen. Suddenly, she realised that something was very wrong.

Lord Corrington had made an arrangement with her. They were meant to pretend they were courting. But was she stifling him too greatly? And did he really dislike her to such an extent that he needed to shut her out completely?

Moreover, why did it bother her so much?

Chapter 14

Milton led Lady Pancks onto the dance floor, charmed to be dancing with yet another lovely young woman that evening. One debutante at a time, he was indulging in all of his most enjoyable company.

He ignored the look on Lady Oakley's face when he glanced at her from across the room. It almost looked something akin to hurt, but he imagined that it was far more likely to be anger. And why should she not be angry with him? He was being a terrible disappointment to their arrangement.

He had to keep up the appearances that he was courting her, but Milton could do nothing more that evening. He could hardly bear the constant pressure of trying to appear as though they were a match when, in his heart, it was painful to be near her and know that there was nothing real between them. Although he was deeply ashamed of it, he was developing feelings for Lady Oakley that he might never have anticipated, feelings that were the very enemy to all the strength and determination he held dear.

Even as Milton smiled at Lady Pancks and tried to focus on her, he could not ignore the fact that his heart was set on another woman altogether. And since when did he allow his heart to follow foolishness like this? He was never the sort of man to give in to such dalliances. That simply wasn't Milton's behaviour.

Whether or not he had changed, he could not say, but he was aware of the fact that he was noticing Lady Oakley more than he had ever noticed another woman, and it bothered him greatly. He simply wanted to forget her. Whatever reason she had for being in his life, he could bear it no longer—not for that evening, anyway. Milton was desperate to push his heart aside and return to the sort of man he had

always been in the past. Nothing else mattered, truly.

He was not going to allow himself to change and be like other gentlemen who gave in to their need for a wife. Instead, he would have this arrangement with Lady Oakley and let it be nothing more. Then, as often as he was able, he would enjoy the company of other women in an effort to remind himself that he was more devoted to maintaining his rakish reputation and dealing with the cares and concerns of the women around him.

“Your Grace, you do appear rather distracted. Please tell me, is there anything I may do in order to help ease your concerns?” Lady Pancks asked.

“You are too kind and such a genteel woman,” he replied. “But as it is, I am very well, thank you. You need not worry yourself with the likes of me. I am just a fool who tends to be distracted by unnecessary things.”

“Your Grace, I do understand if our dance is rather difficult for you,” she said.

“Difficult?”

“Yes, of course. I know that it must be a challenge to find yourself interested in a young woman when you have only just begun courting another,” she said, clearly having interpreted this dance as though Milton was interested in her as a woman and he was torn because he had just begun courting Lady Oakley before finding himself interested in Lady Pancks. He was not certain how to explain to her that she was not more than a distraction for him. And yet, the last thing he wanted was to make her believe that he was suddenly going to begin calling

upon her.

“Oh…well, Lady Pancks, I thank you for taking the time to consider that I might find it difficult; however, I must assure you, I am very well with the circumstance. You see, I do care a great deal for Lady Oakley,” he said.

“You do?” Lady Pancks asked with disappointment drawn upon her face.

“Indeed, I do,” he replied.

The young woman pursed her lips, looking greatly discouraged. Still, Milton wanted to know what he ought to have done differently. As he glanced across the room at Lady Oakley with her mother, he realised that the very thing he was doing now was entirely wrong. He had not made a mistake in committing to the arrangement with Lady Oakley. On the contrary, he had made a mistake in allowing his heart to be so hard against her.

Everything he wanted for himself was falling to pieces, and yet, Milton still tried to believe that he could have the gift and benefit of a friendship with Lady Oakley without having to suffer the consequences of his feelings for her.

“Perhaps, Your Grace, you ought to consider the fact that I, too, am a lady, and I, too, have a very fine pedigree,” Lady Pancks reminded him.

“Of that, I have no doubt,” he said.

“Your dear, sweet Lady Oakley has those things, to be sure, but she… she is not quite the thing, now, is she?” Lady Pancks asked, trying to subtly insult Lady Oakley, insinuating that she was not as fashionable or desirable as others might be. But Milton certainly could not see it that way. He thought Lady Pancks was a fool if she really expected him to believe that.

“Lady Pancks, I do believe that every woman has her attributes. I am sorry that you see it differently,” he said.

Lady Pancks looked as though she wished to protest but thought better of it, avoiding the appearance of pettiness. Milton was grateful for that, far more determined that he would be a reasonable man and not allow an unreasonable woman to interfere in the things he wished for himself.

Instead of continuing in his discussion with her in that moment, Milton looked up towards Lady Oakley once more and saw, much to his shock, that she was dancing with Lord Stanton. He must have shown up recently while Milton was dancing with others. And when he saw them, Lord Stanton looked up at Milton and glared.

Milton was beginning to wonder if he had made a greater mistake. After all, Lady Oakley had said a great many things about not wanting to marry, and she certainly did not seem to be fond of Lord Stanton. So why was she dancing with him now? Was it a change of heart? Was she angry at Milton? Or had her mother forced her to dance with him?

Whatever the reason, Milton was frustrated and wished that it was different. He disliked seeing the two of them together because he knew that Lady Oakley deserved better. There was no reason for this,

no reason that she ought to be pushed into a dance with a man she detested. And yet, she had clearly been upset with Milton.

At last, the dance came to a conclusion, and he grinned at Lady Pancks all over again, at last giving her attention even as their time together came to an end.

“Well, Lady Pancks, I did appreciate the marvellous opportunity to dance with you,” he said.

“I am glad to hear it, your Grace. Should you ever care to pay a call, I am sure that my mother and father would be most welcoming,” she said.

“I have no doubt about it,” he replied, smiling as politely as he was able.

With that, they parted ways. Milton saw that Lady Oakley was off on her own in a corner, watching the new couples take to the floor. There were many men and women milling about near her, but none with whom she was engaged in conversation. Milton took this as a sign that he ought to sneak in and converse with her while he could. Even if his heart was betraying him, he could not resist having a moment alone with her.

“Lady Oakley,” he greeted.

She looked at him with a cold demeanour, a smile that he determined at once to be false. There was something very irritated about her, and she clearly did not mind that he could see it.

“Lord Corrington, nice to see you again this evening. May I help you?” she asked.

How could he apologise? How could he beg her forgiveness and explain that he had run off because he was struggling so greatly with his feelings for her that he simply grew frightened? She would not understand, and how could she? There was no reason at all for her to trust him.

“I fear that I made a very grave error. I understand that we are to be seen as courting, and my straying to speak with and dance with other young women may have harmed our little ruse,” he said quietly.

“I think not, Lord Corrington. No one has said a word to me on the subject, and I am doubtful that anyone has even noticed, for I have not. I fear that I was otherwise engaged as well and did not notice that you had gone to dance with others,” she said haughtily.

Milton could not deny her skill in justifying the situation to herself, in pretending that she had not noticed his poor behaviour. Still, Milton was eager to show her that he meant well and would not intentionally ruin their image for her sake.

“I am very sorry, nevertheless. I wish that I had not gone off as I did, but, you see, I have always been known for my tendency to care for women, and I found it simply irresistible to engage in the behaviours of my former life. I must ask that you would forgive me,” he said.

“There is nothing to forgive,” she replied. “Besides, I, too, was

otherwise distracted. I had quite forgotten about our arrangement for the time being, and I fear that I may have made an error in that I did not consider my card well enough. I accepted a good deal of dances with other men and did not even think of it."

So far as Milton had been watching her, he had seen Lady Oakley dance with three other men, whereas he had danced with six other women. He had certainly been the one who misbehaved, but he could see that Lady Oakley did not need him to remind her of that. For the sake of her pride, he worked hard to let it go and smile as if they were on equal footing.

"Yes, you must forgive me for neglecting my duties," she said. "I was so caught up that I fear I forgot about you entirely."

Suddenly, Milton had a horrible realisation, one that he had not wanted to think possible before. What if she was telling the truth? What if Lady Oakley wasn't simply saying these things in order to soothe her own wounded pride, but what if she actually meant it?

He didn't want to think it was possible, but when Lady Oakley simply turned and walked away from him to go and join her mother in entertaining a group of others, including a few young men, he wondered. Maybe she was only saying these things to save face, but there was a chance that she had said it in all honesty. Maybe she didn't care for him at all.

As Milton thought about this possibility, he found himself growing ever more discouraged. Although he wanted to maintain a bright and cheery demeanour, it hardly worked when he saw that the woman he had been eager to spend his evening with was far from interested in entertaining him at the moment.

As he watched her go, he was startled to realise when Lord Stanton was suddenly beside him.

“Goodness gracious, she certainly left you in a hurry, did she not?” Lord Stanton asked, also looking onward to where she had departed.

“Indeed, she has done so. And you must know that it is perfectly all right with me. After all, I am not her keeper. She ought to enjoy herself this evening as opposed to being stuck with me all the time,” Milton said.

“Oh, dear. It cannot be going very well between the two of you if that is how she sees it,” Lord Stanton said.

“On the contrary,” Milton replied. “I do believe it is the freedom with which I honour her that Lady Oakley finds better about me. Indeed, she appeared to care for me as a result of my sensitivity to her need for autonomy. I should never like to treat a woman as though she belonged to me. That is the very reason she desires the match.”

Lord Stanton turned to him sharply and glared once more.

“You think you are terribly clever, do you?” he asked.

“Not terribly so, just reasonably,” he replied.

“Well, I am very sorry to tell you this, but you are an atrocity to men

of society. I should not like to think that you would be the one to influence her at all in life, and I shall see to it that her dear mother and father realise that you are not worth their time either," Lord Stanton threatened.

"I would be frightened; however, I do not think it is up to you to decide what is best for them. You see, as it happens, I am a duke, and you are an earl. I could explain to you what that means, but I believe you already know," Milton said mockingly.

Lord Stanton seethed. Of course, he knew what it meant. It meant that Milton automatically had the advantage. He was able to prove himself to her family without needing to say or do much at all. Just by way of his title, they would bow to him if he wished.

"You think you are clever, but I shall show you that you are a fool, and you shall never have her," Lord Stanton said.

"I understand, Lord Stanton. And if she had given you the choice to make on her behalf, I would truly feel intimidated. However, as it is, I simply cannot," Milton replied.

Lord Stanton let out a low growl, heard only by Milton, and stormed off and away. Milton shook his head, irritated by the nonsensical attitude of this man. He could not understand how someone might behave in such a dreadful way, but Milton was perfectly happy to see to it that he never again would have to interact with Lord Stanton. All he wanted was to be sure that Lady Oakley was free of the man.

Well, perhaps that was no longer the only thing he wanted. Despite himself, he really had grown to want more from her. A part of him still refused to accept or admit it, but there was also a part of him that

had given up trying. Lady Oakley was remarkable, and as he watched her from across the room, Milton wished he had the courage to tell her that very fact.

Chapter 15

With her heart still wounded by the previous evening, Tess rested in her room late into the day. She could not understand why she had grown so fond of Lord Corrington, but it was deeply frustrating. The fact that she cared for him was a most inconvenient truth from which she wished to be released.

Tess languished for a time in her bed, sighing and trying to sleep as long as she could, keeping her eyes closed against the light that crept in from the gap between her curtains. She wanted nothing more than to forget about the evening all together, but as she lie there, she could do nothing but replay each and every image back, one dance at a time.

Lord Corrington had danced with no less than eight women by the end of the night. Eight women aside from Tess, her mother, and Rue. He was a man with a reputation, and Tess realised she had been a fool to think he might actually like her when, in reality, she had made a grave mistake. After all, each of those eight women likely believed that he liked them. They probably all thought he cared for them and would have wanted to see to it that something might happen between them.

Yes, indeed, it was unfair for Tess to think that he might be willing to do all of this, to put on this charade, just for her sake. He barely knew her, and yet, she was asking him to give up his own, most enjoyable, entertainment with young ladies. That was a cruelty to be sure, and Tess regretted that she had expected it from him. She ought to have known better than to think that a man such as he would let go of such delights as the enticements of other young women.

Still, she grieved. Against all measure of hope, she grieved.

But due to his reputation with woman, Tess had not been prepared for Lord Corrington's nature or how kind and genuine he was. She never would have expected that a man such as he would be so good and gentle. To know that he was every bit that man and still a drastically devilish flirt was confusing and infuriating. All she wanted was to understand how he could possibly be all those things.

He had treated Tess with the utmost respect and autonomy, which was something no one else had ever done for her. As she wondered about his character and nature, Tess couldn't deny that he had given her this gift and she would take it with her as long as she might be allowed to have it.

She would recall, always, that Lord Corrington had seen her as a woman and an individual. He had seen her as someone with very formed opinions and the ability to express them. Even if he might tease her now and again for her thoughts, it was still charming to Tess that he gave her so much room to indulge them.

But when Tess finally realised she could not languish in the bed any longer, she got herself up and started to get ready. She put on a simple dress. There was nothing grand about it, although she still felt lovely wearing it. And as she pinned up her hair, Tess looked in the mirror, hoping that she would be presentable before her mother, who was always so determined that they look their absolute best at all times.

At last, she made her way down the stairs just as the maid was rushing to the front door. Tess darted out of the way just in time, not wishing to be seen by anyone, not wishing to be caught off guard by them at that moment. But once she had flattened herself as best she could around the corner of the long hall, she heard the maid greet someone, followed by a familiar voice.

“Tell me, is Lady Oakley here? I very much wish to speak with her,” Lord Stanton said in his unpleasant way.

“Yes, my lord, she is here. Would you like to sit in the parlour, my lord? She shall be down shortly, I am sure,” the maid offered.

“Good heavens, if you did not dally about like this, then she would have already been here. You are wasting time. Of course, I intend to go to the parlour. I am a guest, am I not? Do guests not usually go to the parlour?” he asked rudely.

Tess narrowed her eyes. Although she could not pop out and confront him on this issue, it was deeply distressing to hear Lord Stanton treat the maid in this way. Then again, he was accustomed to having slaves and, as such, Tess realised that he simply believed he was able to treat others however he wished. He truly thought that they existed for no other reason than to serve him and serve his whims. It was deeply distressing to hear him behave in such a way and to know that it was simply how he was as a man.

After the maid took him to the parlour, Tess stayed put until she heard her mother sending for her. The maid was on her way up the stairs when Tess revealed herself.

“I know, I know,” she said. “I am going. And he ought not to have spoken to you in that way. I am very sorry for it.”

“Thank you, my lady,” the maid replied, keeping her eyes down and descending the stairs once more.

Tess made her way to the parlour and saw Lord Stanton seated there across from her mother.

“Lady Daleshire, I do beg your pardon,” he began, “but my acquaintance is with your daughter. I must speak with her.”

“Oh, yes, certainly. Of course. I shall just be out then,” her mother said, quickly taking her leave. Tess wished she could rush out behind her and beg her not to leave Tess with Lord Stanton.

But, alas, she stood there, across from him as he dropped to his knee.

“Lady Oakley, I know that you must think me a fool for being on my knee like this. After all, who am I to bow to another? I am quite a well-to-do gentleman, and I have every reason to remain standing. And yet, I find that you are the one and only person in all the world for whom I would find myself on my knee,” he said.

Tess was not sure if she ought to be offended or simply irritated. Lord Stanton was being quite foolish, indeed, but not for being on his knee. Rather, he was a fool because he was so self-interested.

“You must be wondering what has led me to this posture of poverty. And now, I must confess to you that it is because of my undying love for you that I offer you my hand in marriage,” he said.

Tess stood frozen, unable to make sense of the proposal and wondering why he would be so offensive in his offer. Did he really

expect her to bow and fawn all over him, begging that he would be so kind as to allow her the gift of marrying him? If so, he was sorely mistaken. She could not understand why he would be so daft as to believe that this was acceptable.

“Now, if you should wish it, I will consent to being your husband,” he said, once more turning the words so that it would be as though Tess had all but begged him to marry her.

“You need not worry, Lord Stanton. I have made no insistence upon you,” she said, thinking it was the best she could say in order to avoid outright offence while still asking him to take back his offer.

He simply cleared his throat as if she had been the one to misunderstand. Then, with an amused grin, he chuckled.

“Oh, dear Lady Oakley, I believe you have misunderstood. I am offering you marriage, you see. You may be my wife. I know that it must be a shock to have this offer from a man such as myself, but I am offering it to you nevertheless. You need not say a word, simply accept this ring,” he said, pulling out a small box from his waistcoat.

“Please, Lord Stanton. I have not accepted your offer,” she said rather firmly.

He looked up with that nonsensical look in his eyes, as though she was simply trying to play a part of humility rather than attempting to make it clear to him that she had no desire to be his wife.

“Well, in that case, you had best hurry up and accept it,” he said.

“I have no intention of doing so, Lord Stanton,” she replied.

“I beg your pardon?” he grimaced.

Tess froze all over again, realising that her mother and father would expect her to accept his offer. But she knew that she never could. Still, she would need to figure out a way of avoiding the offer without having to be subjected to the marriage anyway. Her mother and father would surely push her to accept.

If only he had waited just a little while longer, she might have been able to push this off. After all, she was still being courted, or so it seemed, by Lord Corrington, and the whole point of that was to avoid this very moment and all that would come of it.

“Lord Stanton, I cannot marry you,” she said at last, unwilling to put herself through any more of this. No matter what her mother and father might say, Tess could not suffer through a marriage to this dreadful man. She could not bear it, no matter what he might expect of her. Even as she tried to consider the benefits of being married, she would never marry someone like this. He could not bring her to giving up her pledge of spinsterhood.

“You must forgive me, Lady Oakley, but I believe you have said that you will not have me, and that is not an answer which I am willing to accept,” he said.

“I fear that you have no choice in the matter, Lord Stanton. It is my choice, and I have chosen,” she said.

At this, Lord Stanton's eyes narrowed, and his jaw clenched. His fury was evident, but Tess was trying to ignore it and behave as though all was still well. She wanted him to think that she was simply refusing, and that was that. But she knew that there would be a battle, that he would not simply accept her decision to refuse him.

"You would refuse me? You really believe that is an option? What would your mother and father say about this, hmm?" he asked in an accusatory way.

"I do not believe they shall be very happy with me, Lord Stanton. However, I cannot marry you," she said.

"You foolish girl," he hissed.

"And that is no way to get me to change my mind," Tess said through gritted teeth.

He looked up at her, and his eyes softened somewhat. Tess already knew that he was accustomed to getting his way, and this moment in which she had refused him had simply ruined him. Nevertheless, Tess was going to stick with her decision and not allow him to push her into agreeing to a marriage that would make her miserable.

"You are correct; forgive me. It was uncalled for to say such a thing. But I must ask you, Lady Oakley, why you torture me so. I care for you a great deal, and I wish for the two of us to be joined at the altar, before God and men," he said.

“I am sorry, Lord Stanton, but I cannot marry you,” she repeated.

“Will you at least take a few days to think about it?” he asked.

Tess took a deep breath, ready to refuse him, when he held up a hand to stop her.

“Just a few days. If you decide against it, I understand, and I shall leave you alone. But if you would just allow yourself to consider the opportunity for us to marry, just consider it once, I would be most grateful,” he said.

Tess looked away from him, not knowing what to say or do about the matter. She did not wish to marry him and knew that she never could, but there was still the issue of her own mother and father. If she refused Lord Stanton despite his deep requests that she take some time to consider it, her mother and father would simply agree to the match on her behalf and force it to take place. If, however, she accepted a few days to consider it, she might be able to speak with Lord Corrington first and see if he had any ideas which might enable her to get out of this.

Between that and the extremely pushy behaviour she was receiving from Lord Stanton, Tess finally nodded in agreement. She would give him this selfish wish of his. She would do so because it was the only choice she had, and there was no other way to have the freedom that she craved.

“Lord Stanton, I agree to taking a few days to consider this. However, you must be patient. I shall come to you once I have made up my

mind," she said.

He nodded, although he still appeared rather displeased.

"I expect to hear from you as soon as your mother and father instruct you to do what is wise," he said.

Tess sighed as he departed from the room and, almost at once, her mother burst inside.

"What did he say? Did he ask you? Are you engaged, my dear?" her mother demanded to know, eagerly pestering her for information.

"Please, Mother," Tess sighed. "I do not wish to marry that man. He is perfectly dreadful, and I have told you this. Will you allow me to refuse him? I cannot marry him," she said.

"Refuse him?" Her mother asked in shock. "How could you possibly think to refuse him?"

"He is dreadful, Mother," she replied.

"You foolish girl," her mother scolded, shaking her head. "You are deeply fortunate to have the affections of that man. If you refuse him, you shall be in terrible trouble with your father."

“But what of Lord Corrington?” Tess asked, her voice choking.

“Lord Corrington has not proposed. You must decide urgently, Tess. If Lord Corrington does not propose to you within the next few days, you shall crawl back to Lord Stanton and beg him to have you,” her mother said, her fury clear.

“You would truly subject me to that man?” Tess asked.

“Enough! I have told you what you must do, Tess. See if Lord Corrington will make an offer. If not, the decision has already been made,” she said.

Tess was not sure what she could possibly do. Lord Corrington would never propose to her. They could not be a match of any kind. What were they to do? What was Tess to do?

How could she get through this?

Chapter 16

The wedding ceremony was a grand affair, but nothing pleased Milton so much as seeing James this happy. He was grinning broadly, looking as though he had just inherited the Crown or some such. And Lady Tennant—now Lady Haverdell—was a stunning bride.

The entire morning had been full of excitement and helping James get ready. Even as Milton tied his cravat and donned his hat, he wondered what the day might bring and what the future would look like for James and his new wife.

But a part of him also wondered what his own future would look like and whether or not there was happiness ahead. He hoped as much, but it was difficult to say when he was watching so many others struggle through their new marriages, and he understood that his own situation was deeply unique.

If meeting Lady Oakley had taught Milton anything, it was the fact that he was not half so opposed to marriage as he tried to be. He had spent so many years pinning his distaste for marriage on other things, and now, he realised that he would have to accept the truth, or he would have to simply get over it and move on—possibly even moving on with a woman.

But that woman would not be Lady Oakley. Unfortunately, he had fallen for the one woman in all of England who had no desire to ever marry. It was a deeply unfortunate occurrence.

Still, when the bells rang out, and the harmonious voices of the choir rang out, Milton was glad to be at the wedding and to have witnessed

James obtain such happiness. And when he saw Lady Oakley from afar, the furtive glances they each stole were met with a look of care from the other.

Milton knew that he needed to escape the feelings that he had for Lady Oakley, but he was not yet sure how. For the most part, each time he saw her, he found himself more and more overwhelmed by her loveliness. Something about her demeanour was just enticing to him in every way, and he wished for nothing but companionship from her. Now, more than ever, he was recognising that she was truly something to behold.

“Oh, was that not just the loveliest of weddings,” cried Lady Tennant’s mother, seated next to Milton.

“Indeed, my lady. Your daughter made for a lovely bride,” he said.

“Oh!” she sniffed. “One must be so happy for their child to find their future mate, but it is a tragedy to have to say farewell to a most beloved daughter and hand her off to the hands of a gentleman, even a distinguished one. It is very difficult.”

“I imagine that it must be. I do hope that you will be happy for her regardless,” Milton said.

“Happy? I am always happy for my girl. She is the most beautiful of young women, and I know that she is going to make him happy as well. But you must see that he is something special as well. Oh, of course, you do. He is your good friend. Well, then, you must tell me if you think that she shall be treated very well?” she asked.

Milton smiled at her and gave an affirming nod.

“She shall be treated like a queen,” Milton replied.

It was clear to him that Lady Haverdell’s mother was seeking the same emotional care that most mothers sought in the midst of seeing their daughters married off. Of course, she knew by now that James was trustworthy. He just wanted her to know that all would be well. After all, he knew no one better than James. Not a single man in all the world could compare to his dear friend.

But Milton was quickly taken in by others who wished to speak with him as well, and he had to acknowledge them and indulge in their conversations. With every man and woman who came over to speak with him, Milton was delighted to speak about James and what a wonderful husband he would be to his new bride.

It was then, as he was making the rounds of greeting people, that he saw Lord Stanton from a short distance away. Milton eyed him curiously, seeing that Lord Stanton looked furious, although he could not understand why.

The man was always an unpleasant fellow, to be sure, but this was different. Milton could not understand why he looked so full of hate when he was looking at no one in particular. There was clearly something wrong. It was not simply having seen someone he disliked. It was more than that. It was plain to see that Lord Stanton was utterly overcome by his own anger.

Before Milton could analyse him too closely, he was taken aback by the sudden presence of James beside him.

“Oh! There you are! The groom. And what a fine groom you made, you know. I do believe that your wife thinks that you are the most marvellous person in all the world. She certainly eyed you as though that were the case,” Milton said, greeting James.

“Thank you. I daresay I did my best, and I shall forever do my best to show her how deeply I care for her and how much I wish to ensure that we are happy together, always,” James said.

“I am very happy for you,” Milton replied.

“Well, I wish that others could be so happy. I noted that you were spying Lord Stanton,” James said.

“I fear that I was. I have never seen him looking quite so miserable, and that is saying something,” Milton said.

“Indeed, it is. As it happens, he was jilted yesterday—or so the rumour stands,” James said.

Milton was shocked. He’d heard nothing about it.

“Jilted?” he asked.

“Indeed. By your dear Lady Oakley. He offered marriage, and she told

him that she needed a few days. Again, this is just what I have been told by my wife, but I do trust her, and she is as good a friend to Lady Oakley as any. Oh, dear, are you upset?" James asked.

"Me? Hmm? Why would I be upset?" Milton asked, trying to cover for himself before remembering that he was meant to behave as though he loved her. It was strange, trying to ignore his own heart and recall his determination to not love her all while pretending for others that he did. Milton struggled to understand if he was lying to society or lying to himself.

"You know, because the woman you are courting was proposed to by another man. Are you upset?" James asked again.

"Not so much. I know that she refused him, and that is all that matters. I do not believe she was ever overly fond of him," Milton said, as though that explained it all.

"Fond or not, he's a wealthy man, and her family would be right to chase after that," James said.

"I am certain that they would, but I, too, am very wealthy, and I do have a higher title than he. Therefore, I expect that I still have a little bit of time to get to know Lady Oakley better as we have been trying and then to make my offer of marriage when the time is right," he said.

"You think so?" James asked.

Milton did not think so at all. He knew that the situation was far more

complicated than that, but he couldn't very well share that with James. He needed everyone to believe that he was making every effort to care for Lady Oakley in the midst of all of the strange circumstances like being proposed to by another man. But Milton also found himself torn between wanting her to know that he cared and wanting her to think that he had held to his promise. There was a great deal of confusion, and he wasn't entirely sure what to do now.

"Well, I wish I knew what to say to him, but I expect he will not wish to see me at the moment," Milton said.

"No, indeed, I believe that you would be the last man in all the world he would want to see. After all, you are the reason that she has not said yes at once. He must be very frustrated to have a rival, and I expect that it is also a part of the reason why he has chosen to propose now as opposed to waiting. He probably believed that if he did not propose now, you might," James reasoned.

"Ah, yes, of course. Surely he must have thought that," Milton said, still fighting his own instincts.

"Regardless, I know that the man is struggling with the fact that he has been rejected. I expect that he shall be even less pleasant than normal and, for that reason, I ask you to do your very best to avoid him today. I should not like for my wedding to end up being some sort of dreadful fencing match," James said, rolling his eyes at the apparent thought of violence breaking out at the wedding.

"You have my word," Milton vowed. "I shall leave him alone. However, you must know that I cannot help it if he comes to me. I shall simply do my best to avoid him, and I shall not make a point to tease him for the fact that I appear to have won this little battle over the affections of Lady Oakley."

“Oh, dear. Yes, please do not say things like that in his presence or, I am quite certain, he will try to kill you,” James said.

“I know, I know. Anyway, you had best go and dance with your new bride. I am doing perfectly well right here, and I am eager to see this reception get underway,” Milton said.

James did as instructed and made his way into the hall where the guests were awaiting him. Milton watched him go and saw him find his new bride. It was a wonderful display of love and affection, something that Milton could not quite understand, and he had not yet grasped for his own life. Nevertheless, as he wondered what the future might hold, he was eager to see to it that Lady Oakley knew he was not going to continue going around with other women as he foolishly had on the night of the ball.

He tried to go and find her, but, alas, she was suddenly gone. She had been standing so very close to James’s wife, and then he had seen her near the apple tree outside, but now that everyone was in the hall, his eyes searched for her and could not find her. It was frustrating, but he was hopeful that he would see her if he just looked harder.

At last, he saw a woman with the same blonde hair, pinned nicely in the back. He rushed over to her and placed a hand upon her shoulder.

A stranger, a young woman with blonde hair, a similar height, and none of the other features matching Lady Oakley, turned to him in shock, clearly appalled by his familiarity.

“Oh, dear! I beg your pardon. I believed that you were someone else.

A thousand apologies, my lady, I did not mean to offend you," he said.

For a moment, the girl was still frozen in shock. But it was only a moment before her expression melted into a hopeful one. She seemed to believe that Milton's mistake was somehow fate's design to bring the two of them together.

"You have not offended me. Rather, I am delighted to make your acquaintance," she said.

"Thank you. And yours. Now, if you will excuse me," he said, "I have a dear friend I must find."

Milton rushed away from the girl as quickly as he could, desperate to find Lady Oakley. Even if he could not allow his heart to be so inclined towards her, he needed her to know that he cared, that he would not openly disrespect her by pretending to care for her and court her and then embarrassing her by going about with other young women. Not only that, but he needed to ask her about the proposal from Lord Stanton.

If she had any desire to accept that proposal, their arrangement would have to be ended at once. They needed to discuss what that might look like, and Milton was hopeful that she would tell him he need not worry about it anyway.

But as he could not find Lady Oakley anywhere, Milton was beginning to worry.

At last, he saw the new Lady Haverdell off, greeting some friends. He

rushed over to her and waited for her to notice him. At last, she turned to him and grinned.

“Ah! Lord Corrington! Thank you for attending our wedding. How nice to see you,” she said.

“And you, Lady Haverdell,” he replied.

“Oh, good heavens! It is going to take me quite some time to get used to that name,” she said.

“I expect that you shall be used to it in no time at all. Now, I must beg your pardon, but I am actually looking for your dear friend, Lady Oakley. Have you seen her?” he asked.

“Tess? Hmm….yes. I believe that I have. I am just trying to remember where. Oh! That is it. I saw her heading towards the gardens. There were a few people who have gone out that way to get a bit of air because the hall can be so stuffy when there are this many people plus a very large and wonderful choir,” she said, clearly beaming from her delight in the wedding.

“I see. Very well. Thank you, Lady Haverdell. I greatly appreciate all your help, and I wish you the best moving forward. I expect that we shall see one another again very soon,” he said.

“Oh, yes, indeed. I am sure of it,” she replied.

Milton turned away from her and made his way through a few more people until he saw the gardens outside of the hall. As he peered down the slope, he saw a small bench among the lavender and realised that it was Lady Oakley sitting on the bench. He rushed towards the gate of the garden in hopes of reaching her and speaking to her about all that had taken place.

She appeared discouraged, and he could see that even from here, but nothing was going to stop him from going to her and learning what was the matter. Despite himself, he could not help but care.

Chapter 17

Tess glanced across the garden and saw that Lord Corrington was making his way over to where she sat, comfortably trying to distract herself near the rose bushes. The last thing she wanted to do was pretend that she was not deeply upset with him, upset that he had proven himself to genuinely wish for the arrangement they had come up with to be just that—an arrangement.

No matter what they had decided, her heart had shifted. She had grown to care for him, despite herself. She had begun to think about how wonderful a future might be if she was able to spend it with him, to enjoy his company at all times and engage with him in whatever may lie ahead.

But as he drew nearer and she saw the expression on his face, Tess's heart quickened even more so. She saw the apology in his eye, the sadness in his own face. She wondered, for just a moment, if it was possible that he might have a care for her beyond what they had decided.

Lord Corrington had treated Tess as an equal, and that was something she had never expected from anyone, least of all a man such as him. Although he was charming and witty, handsome and strong, he was not the sort of man she would have anticipated to care for or to receive care from in return.

But when he sat beside her, Tess felt a rush of warmth, and her heartbeat quickened once more. He was so near to her, and she could hardly believe that she had the gift of his company—a thought which would have previously infuriated her. However, he had treated her as an equal and, because of that, she was glad to be near him.

“Lady Oakley,” he said gently.

“Lord Corrington,” she greeted in reply, trying to remain stoic.

“I can see that you have a good deal on your mind,” he said.

“Is that so? And how are you able to tell? Is it that obvious?” she asked.

“It is, indeed. And I can see that whatever is on your mind, it is not something that you are happy about. Rather, you appear frustrated. Perhaps even a bit aloof,” he said.

“Aloof? You think me, aloof?” Tess asked. She found it strange that he would think that, given their circumstance. Of course, he was supposed to believe she was indifferent about him, that she was perfectly ambivalent. That was how they had determined to feel about one another, and he ought to have expected it in private when they were not in the midst of their performance of caring for one another. But it seemed to bother him—something she had not expected.

“I think you are distracted,” he replied. “And because of that, I must ask you a difficult question.”

Tess looked up at him and waited. He glanced at her but then looked away before asking.

“Has Lord Stanton proposed to you?” he finally managed to ask.

Tess solemnly nodded. She was utterly defeated, broken by the circumstances. It was painful trying to explain to him exactly what had happened, and she didn’t want his pity—just a chance to spend time with him and mourn that her plan came to nothing.

“I am sorry to hear that,” he said, his tone truly full of lament. “I wish that I had known it was going to come to this, and I would have made a more concerted effort. I expect that your mother and father are thrilled.”

“They are glad that he has asked, but they are anxious to know how I shall ultimately reply,” Tess said.

She felt his gaze once more, searching to understand what she meant by that.

“I have told them that I need a few days to decide. However, my mother has made it plain to me that unless I receive another offer of marriage within a few days, I must accept him,” Tess explained. She didn’t wish to go into great detail or to beg him to propose to her. She only needed Lord Corrington to know what had happened in its simplest form.

“You mean, you have not accepted Lord Stanton’s proposal as of yet?” Lord Corrington asked.

“I could not bring myself to. They shall have to force me. I will not do

it of my own free will," she said.

"Is that so? You hate him so much?" Lord Corrington asked.

"I do not wish to think of it as hate. Why must it be hate for a woman to simply not wish to marry a man who is not good for her?" She asked.

"Very true. Forgive me. That was a foolish thing I said," he apologised.

"No, not foolish. I simply wish that more people would understand the difficulties that a young woman faces when she is being forced into a marriage against her will. I wish that it was better understood that I may not care for him, and there is nothing truly wrong with that," she said.

"Nothing at all," he agreed.

"Then, why? Why is it that I am somehow made ashamed of my lack of affection for him? Why am I made to be looked down upon? I do not wish to be seen in this way. Truly, I would marry him if he was a decent man, but he is not," she said.

"And I have failed to help you. Our plan has not worked," he said.

"It was my own fault. I really believed that we would have a chance to make something of it, but I failed," Tess said.

“No, no. You did not fail. It was likely my own fault. I did not intimidate him enough to leave you alone,” Lord Corrington said.

“I never asked you to. Anyway, it no longer matters. It is all done with for now,” Tess said. “I cannot refuse him without another proposal.”

Lord Corrington took her hand, and Tess looked up at him patiently. He was so handsome that she nearly swooned for a moment before remembering herself. Why did he have to be so dashing? Why was she allowing herself to care? Surely it was better that she remember the fact that she was not going to give herself over to caring about someone—to loving someone.

“If you would like for it, I will propose. We knew that it may come to this, and I understand that it is quite necessary. Would you like for me to do so? Perhaps it would appease your mother,” Lord Corrington offered.

But Tess did not simply wish for her mother to be appeased. Tess wished for Lord Corrington to actually want to propose to her. She wanted him to care for her, to feel the same way about her that she felt about him. It was unfair—deeply unfair—that she should have a change of heart, and he should not. It was utterly ridiculous.

“Please,” he said, still urging her to allow him. “I believe it would be the best thing. You would be able to delay your marriage, to refuse Lord Stanton even. He would move on and find someone else. In the meantime, I would be there for you for as long as we may push the charade. Then, when you feel the time is right, you may break the engagement.”

Tess swallowed, not knowing what to say. She understood that he was trying to make a good offer, to give her a chance to have her way. And yet, it didn't feel right.

"If you are the one to break the engagement, no one will call your reputation into question," he said. "It would appear as though you simply decided that I was not serious enough for you. As you know, my own reputation is already a bit of a mess, and no one would care to think about me being a lout."

"You are not a lout," Tess said, before she had a chance to stop herself. Her throat caught with the words, and she could not understand where all this emotion had come from. She was not this sort of woman. She was a strong, bubbly woman with determination and independence. So why was she so bothered by this? Why did it matter to her at all?

"I am grateful that you have such faith in me, but it would appear that everyone else believes to the contrary. Regardless, I think it could be to your benefit if you would simply allow me to do this for you. Your mother shall never know that we have arranged it all. Instead, she will firmly believe that we are intending to marry, and I trust that Lord Stanton will leave you alone once you have chosen to accept my proposal over his," Lord Corrington said.

"And I am grateful for such an offer. I know that we discussed the possibility of it, and yet, now that it comes to it, I do not know if it is truly the best course," Tess said.

"Why not? Do you believe that Lord Stanton would try to stop us? I can think of nothing better to do than to at least try to get you out of this dreadful situation," he said.

“As much as I would like to get out of it, I simply do not believe that there is a way. Our attempts to do so have failed,” Tess said, not wanting to play this game any longer.

She was crushed by the idea of having to end an engagement to Lord Corrington. If they pretended to become engaged, if he actually proposed and she accepted all for the sake of this charade, Tess would have no choice but to eventually end it rather publicly. Letting go of the betrothal would be exceedingly painful, and Tess was not certain as to whether or not she could bring herself to do so.

Although she hated the idea of marriage, she hated the idea of tying herself to a man like this; Tess could not deny how deeply she cared for Lord Corrington and how much she appreciated the freedom he was so perfectly willing to give her.

Meeting him had changed a great many things for Tess. She had never expected that her heart would begin to shift into a position of believing that love could lead to anything, but here she was. Now, for the first time in all her life, the idea of marriage was not simply bearable but even desirable. That was a frightening thing to feel.

And Tess wished to avoid those feelings altogether.

“So you would not have me do whatever I may in order to help you?” Lord Corrington asked. “Please, allow me this one chance. I wish to help you, to ensure that you are not forced to suffer a fate such as marriage to that dreadful man.”

“And why should it matter to you? Do you hate him so much that you fear the thought of him having anything he may wish for?” Tess challenged, wondering why he cared at all. After all, Lord Corrington was just another man. She could not allow herself to think that he was any different, even if her heart longed for him to be. She made every effort to trust that his true nature could not be hidden for long and that he would eventually show himself to be every bit as callous as Lord Stanton.

But she knew that wasn’t true, and it only made it all the more painful. And the way he looked at her in light of that question caused Tess’s gut to flutter as he lingered so near to her. In that moment, she wondered if he was going to kiss her. He looked as though he might actually close the distance between them, that he may choose to grant her this moment of marvellously close affection.

“Please, tell me that you will consider it,” he said in a quiet, gentle voice.

“Consider a false engagement?” she asked in the same, low tone.

“Yes,” he replied with difficulty. “Consider that I may help you and that this may be your chance to get out of such a dreadful circumstance. Consider that I am your friend, and I am here for you in any way you may need me.”

Tess inhaled a ragged breath, struggling against her newfound interest in the possibility of romance and marriage. She didn’t want to allow herself even a bit of room to think further about it. Not when she knew that Lord Corrington, likewise, was opposed to such unions.

“I thank you for the offer, Lord Corrington,” she said. “I shall consider

it and decide whether or not it is the right thing for me."

"Please do. And write to me at once upon your decision. I should not like to miss a moment to make my proposal should you require it of me. If you are forced to be with that man purely for the sake of my having missed a chance to help you, I would feel a great deal of responsibility for that misfortune. Know that I am more than willing to take part in this and to continue trying to find a way to get you out of this marriage," he said.

Tess nodded, grateful for his kindness but still struggling against the fact that she wished it was more than that. If his offer had been for a true marriage, she would have accepted in an instant—a thought which left her quite shocked and even afraid of how changeable she was in light of this man.

"Shall I leave you? You do not appear to want company," he acknowledged.

"Forgive me. I am not trying to be rude. It is just that I am rather upset about the engagement," she said.

"And, may I ask, are you still upset with me?" he asked.

Tess struggled to answer. She could hardly confess how it had crushed her to see him with those other women, but Tess also realised she had done a poor job of hiding her emotions.

"I understand," she replied, unable to say anything more.

“Well,” he said. “I suppose that is something. Now, I wish you the best of days, Lady Oakley. If there is anything you need from me, please write to me at once. I shall come to you.”

With that, Lord Corrington was up and leaving Tess behind. She couldn’t deny how desperately she wished for him to turn back to her and remain by her side. But this was the consequence of her choices and her long-time hopes to never marry.

She was alone.

Chapter 18

Milton realised, much to his own shock, that he had fallen in love with Lady Oakley. Never in all his life had he thought such a thing would be possible, but here it was. He cared for her in a way he had never cared for a woman, and he could no longer deny it.

Certainly, his better judgment had warned him against this. The generations of his past had warned him that marriage was not an option he could consider. His mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother had all suffered the same fate, and he would not allow Lady Oakley to endure that suffering. It would be irresponsible and cruel. However, he was not sure she would understand if he tried to explain.

Although many people would have told him he was a fool for believing the rumours surrounding the women in his family and the fates which always befell them, Milton could not bear to take the risk. His decision to never marry had come as the only solution to preventing the dangerous outcome he knew would result if he gave in to his emotions.

However, there was nothing he could do about this newfound affection or the fact that he was coming to see that Lady Oakley was struggling against the proposal she had received. He wanted to help her, to aid her.

No longer was this plan of theirs a matter of preventing mothers and debutantes from trying to grab Milton's attention and for his avoidance of marriage, but it was about protecting the woman he truly cared for. And he wasn't simply trying to ruin Lord Stanton's chance at happiness either. Milton truly did not wish to subject Lady Oakley to that discomfort and unfortunate circumstance.

At home in his estate, Milton waited to hear from Lady Oakley. He truly couldn't imagine how painful it would be to have to propose, knowing that she would later break the engagement and, thereby, break his heart. Still, he could not allow his feelings to get too hurt. He had gotten himself into this mess, and it was now up to him to accept the fate of that. His consequence was striking, and Milton realised that he had brought this upon himself.

Taking a deep breath and reminding himself that everything would be fine, Milton knew that he had no choice, and that was all there was to it. He could not marry Lady Oakley, but he had to help her avoid marrying Lord Stanton, and that was worth whatever heartache he may experience.

In the meantime, however, Milton was bored. With James having departed along with his new wife and knowing that they would be gone for over a week, Milton had no one with whom he could spend his time, milling about and enjoying town. He figured that he may as well go to the club and see some of the other gentlemen there. Outside of his work, he had very little else to do, and that was something, at least.

When Milton arrived, he walked in to see Lord Stanton already entertaining the crowd of men. Yes, many of these gentlemen detested him, but they would not speak of it whilst he was there, and many of them gave Lord Stanton time to share whatever nonsense was in his mind. They laughed at his stories and pretended to be amused by him.

"So, you see, my father is a hero, really. If it were not for him, the entire empire would be lost. However, with his efforts, we have ensured that workers are made available to the Brits. After all, we are superior to all peoples around the globe and, as such, it is only right that they should all aid us in the prosperity of our dealings," Lord

Stanton said.

“And your father is the only one who could make this happen?” one gentleman teased.

“Of course, he is. He is fighting for the rights of all good, noble Englishmen to have the workers they require. Without his efforts, we could be lost to those foolish abolitionists,” he said.

“But is it not so that the woman you have been courting, Lady Oakley, speaks out in staunch support of the abolitionists?” the man challenged.

Lord Stanton laughed and shook his head.

“She is but a woman, as changeable as the shoes she wears from day to day. You need not worry about that. She simply has not been educated properly in this matter. Her father is loosely against the idea of bringing labour from the East Indies and Africa, but I do not think it will ever be a contemptible issue between the two of us once I have explained to her the reality of how it is,” Lord Stanton said.

Milton could contain himself no longer.

“If we are so superior, is it not shameful that we require the labour of those whom you deem to be inferior as a means of succeeding?” Milton asked, choosing to set aside his fury over how Lord Stanton spoke of Lady Oakley. For the moment, and in public, he could only discuss matters of a political nature rather than a personal one. Then again, he realised, he was deeply, personally disgusted with the idea

of slavery and all that Lord Henbridge and his son stood for.

Lord Stanton turned to him, noticing him for the first time, and glared.

“Good heavens, is it you again? I would have expected you to have gone and left me alone by now. What is it you want?” he asked, rather dismissively. Milton could not care less about the insult but rather wished to express his indignation against Lord Stanton through a hearty debate in which he knew he could make his point perfectly clear.

“I would like to know why we, such a great and mighty people, need aid from those who you do not respect? Should that not be evidence to you that we are not so superior? Should it not strike you as humbling that we require their help?” Milton asked.

“I must confess that I am shocked,” Lord Stanton said. “I would have thought that a nobleman such as yourself would think better of England. You are no patriot, Lord Corrington.”

“You deflect my argument?” Milton asked.

“I need not deflect anything. It is a flawed argument. You are disregarding my point,” Lord Stanton said.

“And what is your point? To my understanding, you have stated that the English require the help of those you deem inferior. But if they are the only reason we are able to survive, as you have said—not I, it means that we are not so victorious,” he said.

Lord Stanton opened his mouth to speak but was unable to come up with anything worthwhile. Although this gave Milton great satisfaction, he was not sure how or why he had allowed himself to get sucked into this argument. Lord Stanton was hardly worth his time and energy, and all of this was just a means of sharing their mutual disdain for one another.

"Very well," Lord Stanton said. "You wish a victory over me? You may have it. Although I shall never cede the fact that England is by fact the greatest nation in the world and that others are due to give her this praise, I should not like to sink to such an argument with you. If you wish to prove yourself unpatriotic, I understand."

Milton rolled his eyes, thinking this was the most pathetic excuse he had ever seen a man use in order to gain approval for his boldly foolish declarations, but Milton would hear no more of it. He had spent enough time around this man to know that Lord Stanton would only ever throw himself at the feet of anyone whose approval he desired. Primarily, that meant his father. He was not the sort of man who would consider the betterment of others.

It was shameful, but that was simply his nature.

"Lord Stanton, I see that, in your eyes, the most patriotic way to live as an Englishman is to demean the lives of others. I, however, believe in a better Britain. I fully support men such as Ignatius Sancho and his ilk who fight for the freedom of the enslaved. And if you cannot understand this ideology, I pity you," Milton said, standing and taking his leave. He could no longer bear the drivel of Lord Stanton or understand why others allowed for his shameful opinions.

Lord Stanton may have believed his father to be a hero, but it was preposterous. Milton was grateful to have finally departed from the club but was, once more, at a loss for what to do with his time. He found himself anxious, lonely and wishing that he had someone to share himself with. In that moment of thought, when he realised that he actually wanted this, Milton was caught off guard by his hopes.

He wanted a wife. He wanted to commit himself to someone who would remain by his side through the good and the bad times. Indeed, he truly wanted to be with Lady Oakley and to have her for a wife.

This was nothing that he had anticipated, but once that thought entered his mind, he was unable to escape it. Milton could not believe what was in his heart, but he also could not bring himself to fight against it. Lady Oakley was lovely in his eyes.

Milton made his way through the streets, deciding to walk home. There was a bit of a chill in the air, and he knew that he ought to have brought a better coat with him but tried to ignore the changing of the weather.

But as he walked, Milton was caught off guard by something he had not expected.

Heading his way, he saw Lady Zinnia Glass, a young woman with whom he'd flirted a great deal in the past. And although nothing had ever come of it and she, too, was a bit of a flirt, Milton panicked upon realising that she was with her mother.

Lady Glass's mother had been hopeful that something might spark between them. Unfortunately, when it did not, Milton's reputation had only become worse, and it was after this event that he had thrown

himself further into the gossip that surrounded him. He did not mind, truly, whether or not people spoke ill of him. However, he realised that he had wounded Lady Glass through that event. And now, seeing her was simply a reminder of the fact that there were many reasons he did not deserve Lady Oakley.

In addition to his wanton ways, Milton had hurt other women, and for that reason, he did not feel that he could be trusted with the heart of a woman like her.

Before he could possibly escape being noticed, Lady Glass saw him. Milton tried to avoid her gaze, but it was too late. Her mother had also seen him. If he were to try and leave quickly, it would have been dreadfully rude and painfully obvious that he was attempting to avoid them. Instead, Milton took a deep breath and looked at them both with an apologetic smile.

“Good afternoon, Lord Corrington,” her mother greeted. Lady Glass mumbled the same greeting and curtseyed before him with a look of evident hurt in her eyes.

“Good afternoon. I am quite glad to see you both,” he said.

“Is that so? Well, you ought to have known that you were always welcome at our home. Unfortunately, however, you seem to have forgotten us,” Lady Glass said, rather boldly.

“Zinnia!” her mother scolded.

“No, she is right. I was unwise and, therefore, unkind. I made an error

in judgment, and it caused your daughter to be wounded by my own selfishness. For that, I am terribly sorry," he said, not wanting to leave it any longer for Lady Glass to ache and worry about what had led to his selfish actions.

"Well, regardless of the decisions you made, I have raised my daughter to be a lady. This sort of pettiness shall not be tolerated," her mother said.

"It is not pettiness, I fear," Milton said. "Her anger is not misplaced. I was wrong."

Milton could see the shock in Lady Glass's eyes and in her mother's as well. No matter how he might have tried to hide his errors in the past, he could do so no longer. It was impossible to try anything different now. He was a man of a great many flaws, and he was finally coming to face them.

"Well, it is good that you are able to admit your wrongdoing, but I fear that it is too late. I have already had to face that you are a notorious flirt who does not mean any kindness to another person," Lady Glass said.

Milton allowed her to say what needed to be said, understanding that this was certainly deserved for his part. Lady Glass turned her nose up at him and, along with her mother, walked away from Milton with determination in her steps.

He took a deep breath, feeling that this was one of the worst days he had ever experienced. Not only was he pining with love for a woman who wished only to use him—just as he had wished only to use her—but he was now facing the consequences of past women he had

wounded. On top of it all, he'd been forced to interact with Lord Stanton and engage in the frustrations of that.

In all, it was a terribly unfortunate day, and Milton wished to do something other than go home, but he was at a loss. There was nothing at all for him to do but depart for the striking but lonely manor in which he lived.

Once he arrived, Milton greeted his housekeeper and retired to the study with a glass of brandy and a book. He could not concentrate, and his mind was still deeply troubled.

The only thing he could hope for was that Lady Oakley might accept his offer to propose. Then, if he was fortunate enough, she would see that they truly would make a decent match. And if she did not, he would at least spend his life knowing that he had aided the only woman who ever meant anything to him at all.

Chapter 19

Tess sat up from the bed in her room. She had been lying there, pondering her agony, for quite some time. However, she knew that it was time to get up and make a decision. After all, there was much to be dealt with, and Tess could hardly bear to push her feelings aside any longer.

Indeed, she needed to figure out a way to handle the struggles she was facing. Lord Corrington had made her an offer, and it was time for her to accept it and move forward.

It was going to be exceedingly painful to deny Lord Corrington one day, but she would have no other choice. She could not very well expect him to have a change of heart just because she had. It would simply never come to pass. To fool herself into believing otherwise was only a disservice she was doing to herself.

This way, she would be allowed the freedom she had always craved. Tess would be given the chance to live her own life and enjoy it, to take on the independence she longed for. Indeed, she would be abandoned by Lord Stanton and would come to refuse Lord Corrington in time. With a broken heart—one she would not have to fake—her mother and father would likely give her time to gather herself before they would try to push her into another courtship.

And by then? No one would want her. She would be known as the young woman who had been abandoned and had rejected another. By that point, she would be a spinster and would have nothing left to offer anyone. This rejection would be a great relief to her.

Tess could hardly wait for the day when she was free. Although she understood the complications which came with that freedom, she was eager to see to it that she was released from these bonds. If she had not allowed her heart to be so torn, it would have been a great victory.

"Tess?" her mother called from the hall, interrupting her pining.

She rushed to the door and took a deep breath, pasting a smile upon her face.

"Yes, Mother?" she asked.

"There you are. Are you still in bed? Good heavens, what would you do if one of your suitors came to call? You must make yourself presentable. You never know when you may find that someone wishes to see you or to speak with you. Now, you must be up and ready," her mother said, scolding her.

"Yes, Mother," she replied in a tone rather more subdued than was typical for her.

For a long moment, her mother eyed her with curiosity, but she relented and departed, leaving Tess to herself and to her own concerns.

Quickly dressing and pinning her hair in as neat a manner as she was able, Tess hoped she looked reasonable enough to appease her mother for the time being. Although she had little care for being perfect, Tess did hope that she would be somewhat ready in case Lord Corrington

came to call.

However, there was no reason that he would or should and, for that, Tess scolded herself for even bothering to have hope.

But it did remind her of the great importance of what she needed to do. With a decision finally made, Tess sat at the desk in the drawing room and drafted a letter to Lord Corrington.

Dear Lord Corrington,

I hope this letter finds you well.

I am grateful for the offer you have made, and I should like to accept. If you are still willing to propose, it would be of great help to me. Although I still feel bad for using you in this way, I am grateful that you have given me such an opportunity to avoid the other union which is being forced upon me.

My mother and father would be delighted if I were to be engaged to someone such as yourself and, if I am not, I shall have no choice but to marry this other man whom we both detest with great vehemence.

Should you still be willing to aid me in this endeavour, I would be most thankful. I should also like to ask if you would do so sooner rather than later as I have only a few days left before I must answer the other man.

Thank you,

Taking a deep breath, Tess folded and sealed the letter. She wished to have it sent to him at once and hoped that the footman would do so. If she was fortunate enough, Lord Corrington would come the next day and ensure that she was rescued from the potential engagement to Lord Stanton, which she was so desperate to avoid.

Tess made her way down the stairs and found the footman in earnest.

“Please take this at once,” she requested with a smile.

“As you wish, my lady,” he replied with a nod before turning and leaving through the servant’s door.

Tess made her way back to the drawing room, and, nearly at once, her mother entered as well.

“Tess! Tess!” she called.

Tess turned to her and saw that her mother was in the sort of mood she frequently had when anxious about a gentleman.

“We just received word from Lord Stanton. He is coming, my dear. He should be here very shortly,” her mother said, waving the card in the

air.

Tess exhaled slowly, trying to steady herself. The last thing in the world she wanted was to have to see him.

“But, Mother, he promised to give me time to consider his proposal. Is he coming to force me to give him an answer?” Tess asked.

“Oh, good heavens, so what if he is? You need to tell him, my dear. Lord Corrington has not yet proposed, so why are you insisting that you must delay this any longer? You should accept Lord Stanton and be done with it,” her mother said.

“But, Mother, I need to give Lord Corrington just a few more days. I would much prefer him,” Tess said, pleading with her mother.

At last, her mother rolled her eyes and gave a casual shrug that she would never have done were they in public.

“Very well, but you shall make a madwoman of me, Tess. Honestly, I cannot understand why you would make it so difficult for such a great man to simply have the peace of knowing that you will marry him. If you prefer Lord Corrington, I shall give you a few more days, but you have to consider that he has not been courting you for very long,” her mother said.

“I know that, Mother,” Tess replied.

“He may not wish to rush the matter. You would be very lucky indeed if he chose to urgently propose,” she continued.

“Yes, Mother, I understand. But I should like to at least give him the opportunity,” she said.

“Well, when Lord Stanton comes, allow him to say whatever he wishes to say, and then you may tell him that you still need time,” her mother said.

“Thank you, Mother,” Tess replied. She was not able to escape this visit, but at least she would have an opportunity to more easily deal with the matter and not be quite so frustrated by having to fend off her mother’s hopes for a formal engagement.

It was not even a half an hour before Lord Stanton arrived, his smile broad, set against a masculine face with a sharp jaw and Roman nose. Indeed, there were many young women who found him handsome, but Tess was so horrified by who he was as a man that she could not understand why.

“Good afternoon, Lady Oakley,” he greeted, looking at her with an expression that he probably thought conveyed masculinity or some other desirable trait. But Tess simply straightened her back and mustered a half-smile and a curtsy.

“Good afternoon, Lord Stanton,” she replied.

“Well, if the two of you will excuse me, I must see to it that we have tea brought,” her mother said, rushing from the room in an obvious

effort to give them privacy. For the sake of propriety, she left the door open, but Tess would have much preferred that her mother remain there so she would not have to endure this either way.

“At last, we are alone,” Lord Stanton said.

“Indeed, we are alone. However, I feel that it is much better to remain obedient to the proprieties of society,” Tess said, trying to maintain a smile while hinting that she was uncomfortable.

“Certainly, of course. It is very important to remain proper. However, you must know by now that I will always treat you with the utmost respect. Lady Oakley, you are most gracious, and I believe that you are quite remarkable. It is for this reason and no other that I have come to see you,” he said.

“You have come despite the fact that we agreed I could have a few more days,” she said.

“Yes, yes,” he said in a rush. “Of course. You must take your time in making this decision. However, I still cannot help but express my longing to be near you. As you know, I love you, Lady Oakley. Perhaps it is not right for a man to be so bold and make this claim, but there it is. And it is the fullest truth. I am in love with you, and I find you to be the most stunning, exquisite creature I have ever known. My heart longs to be close to yours,” he said, with more poetry than Tess would ever have expected from him. And yet, even with this claim, she knew that his idea of love was nothing at all like hers.

“That is a very pretty claim, Lord Stanton. However, it does not change that I would like a few more days,” she said.

Disappointment and wounded pride crossed his face. Tess could see that he was even a bit angry, but it didn't matter in that moment. She needed him to understand that he had no claims upon her.

"Well, of course, I am willing to give you those days. I simply thought that you may wish to know what was in my heart, and I should very much like to give you the opportunity to end my misery if you wished it," he said.

"I fear that I must remain strong in my determination to take my time in this matter," Tess said.

"Ah, I am aggrieved by it, but I understand. May I ask, regardless, if this is a matter of some…other man?" he questioned.

Tess breathed steadily, not wishing to reply. Not only was she confused about her answer, but it was not appropriate for him to even ask it.

"My lord, you ought not to ask such a question," Tess said.

"Even if I ask it for the sake of my own sanity?" he asked.

"Even then. I fear that it is very uncomfortable for me to attempt to answer you when I hardly know what to say. You are, no doubt, aware that I have been courted by another, but you and I were not engaged—just as we are not currently—at the time of this gentleman beginning to court me. As such, I ask that you maintain propriety and

allow me to rest in my own thoughts," she said.

"You must understand why that is so difficult for me," he said.

"Difficult or not, I must ask you to suffer it because I am still making my decision. You have given me a few more days," she reminded him.

"Yes, yes. I know. I am not forcing you to give me an answer; I am simply hopeful that you will do so soon enough," he replied.

Tess clenched her jaw, not wishing to speak to him any further. She couldn't understand why he was pushing her so much. Was it not enough that she had promised to tell him when she was ready? There was no reason to urge her in the way he was doing.

"Lady Oakley, may I at least ask if Lord Corrington has proposed to you?" He asked, saying the name with a hint of disdain.

Tess steadied herself, not wanting to answer that but knowing that she might as well. It wouldn't change matters, whether she told him or not.

"Lord Corrington has not, at this point in time, proposed to me. I know that you are curious as to whether or not he will and if I would say yes, and that remains to be seen. I would appreciate it, Lord Stanton, if you would be patient," she said, wanting nothing more than to be rid of him in that moment.

“Well, that is something, is it not? I am relieved to hear it. I feared that he would not understand his place and that he might be bold enough to attempt to steal something which is mine,” Lord Stanton said.

For a long moment, Tess stared at him. She could not believe his gall or the fact that he would speak about the matter in this way. Wondering what could possibly have caused him to think about it like this, she inhaled a long breath to calm herself before finally speaking.

“Lord Stanton, I must ask you to depart,” Tess said.

He scoffed and looked deeply offended, but she could not abide him any longer and had no intention of doing so.

“I beg your pardon?” he asked.

“I fear that I must ask you to leave. I cannot abide the way you have spoken. You do not own me, and it is deeply important to me that you understand this,” she said with as much stability as she could. Tess made every effort to refrain from expressing too much emotion, which she understood would only make her appear weak.

“Well, that is rather unexpected. I thought that you knew how much I care for you, and you would be willing to hear me express it, but if you are simply going to be angry and nonsensical, I cannot imagine what I am meant to do in order to make you happy,” he said.

“I have just told you what would make me happy. I would be happy if you depart for the time being and allow me to gather my thoughts,”

she said.

For a long moment, it appeared as though he was going to express his indignation, but alas, Lord Stanton finally stood with frustration and departed. Tess gave herself a moment to register all that had just taken place, wishing that she never had to experience another conversation with that man again.

However, her mother soon returned, and her confusion was evident.

“Where has Lord Stanton gone?” she asked.

“He departed,” Tess replied.

“But why?” her mother asked.

Tess swallowed and straightened her back before answering.

“Unfortunately, he was unable to accept that I am not eager to marry him,” she said. “But you need not worry, Mother. I have hopes that another offer will come soon enough."

Chapter 20

Milton embraced his Aunt Thea, who had always been a kind and faithful family member when Milton had lost everyone else. She was his father's sister and had grieved with him through the loss of the late Lord Corrington.

"Oh, Milton, my boy!" she exclaimed.

"Aunt Thea, how marvellous to see you. I am so happy you have returned from your travels," he said.

"As am I. And the boys are very eager to see you again," she told him, just in time for Nathaniel, Thomas, and Collins to come running up to him.

There, in the foyer of Thea's townhouse, Milton swept Collins, the youngest, into his arms as Thomas threw his arms around Milton's leg.

"Move! It is my turn!" Nathaniel argued.

"No, it is not. He wishes to see us all equally," Thomas disputed.

"On that point, you are correct," Milton said, kneeling on the floor, so he was eye level with the two older brothers. "I am glad to see you all. As for turns, no one gets a turn. We are all here together. It is that simple."

“Did Mama tell you about our trip to Italy? It was so pretty. But it was very boring when she made us walk through large estates covered in paintings, and we were forced to listen to an old man tell us about each person in the paintings. Some of the men were very, very ugly, but he insisted that they were all very important as well,” Nathaniel complained.

“Good heavens! That is intriguing. And I recall that you had a birthday whilst you were away, correct?” Milton asked, pulling a small gift from his pocket.

“Yes! I did! I am nine years of age now, very near to ten,” Nathaniel said, taking the gift. “What did you get me?”

“Well, that is something you shall have to open it to find out,” Milton replied.

“Milton, really. You should not have gotten him anything,” Thea said, sidling over to him and shaking her head.

“It really is my pleasure to have done so. And how are you? How has it been for you, being away as you were? I trust that you had a lovely time?” Milton asked.

“Oh, indeed, it was remarkable. More than anything, I was simply relieved to be away from London for a bit. You know how it can be here. Sometimes, a woman simply needs time away from all the gossip and pageantry,” she said.

“Yes, of course. I imagine so,” he said. “And to have time with the boys must have been wonderful.”

“It was. I know that it does not take away the sting of loss, but I think it was enough of a distraction to them that they were able to look beyond the passing of their father for a little while,” she said.

Milton embraced her once more as tears sprung to her eyes. The boys were off, playing with the dog they had missed so dearly whilst they were abroad over the previous six months since Thea’s husband passed away.

“Oh, goodness me. You must ignore me,” she said, waving away the moisture in her eyes. “Now, come and sit with me. We have much to catch up on.”

Milton followed her to the parlour, where the maid was already setting the tea for them. They sat, and Thea looked at him with the questions already in her eyes.

“I had tea with Lady Terrence this afternoon,” she said.

“Oh, and how was she?” Milton asked.

“She was very well; other than that, she did tell me a strange bit of news which has, apparently, been circling around London,” she said.

“What sort of news?”

“It would appear as though a certain young bachelor, a man known very well for his rather…flirtatious ways…has seen fit to begin courting a young woman of quite an esteemed family,” she said.

Milton couldn’t help but grin and look away, rather shyly. He was embarrassed that his aunt should address this topic with him, but he found that he was grateful to have someone with whom he could share it.

“Well?” she prompted.

“Well, what am I to say on the matter? Indeed, there is a young woman about whom I care,” he said.

“But this is quite a shock! Certainly not an unwelcome one, but you are not the sort of young man I ever expected to marry. You have mentioned a great many times that you had no intention to do so,” she said.

“Yes, I understand. But you and many others all used to tell me that one day I would change my mind,” he said.

“Well, that is often how it goes,” she said.

“Which leads me to ask if you happened to see Lord Danvers while

you were in Italy?" Milton asked, grinning as he did so. Immediately, Thea began to blush.

"And why should you ask me about this?" she asked.

"I know that you miss your husband, Aunt Thea, but you are a wealthy dowager now, who has to think of her sons. Everyone is hopeful that a match might be made of the two of you upon the end of your mourning period," he said.

Thea sighed and nodded.

"I expect that it shall. It is very difficult, you know, being rushed to marry again so soon after losing the man I loved," she said.

"But, I thought you cared for Lord Danvers," Milton said.

"He is a nice man and, should I marry again, he is a fine choice. But it does not make it easy. It is simply what a woman must do in order to secure her future and to care for her children. A shame, really," she said.

But Milton could see that she was torn. He had thought his aunt liked Lord Danvers, but he saw now how deeply she missed her husband, and he felt sorry for her, having to make such an adjustment.

"I wish that I could wait a year or two," she said.

“Then, you must!” Milton said.

“My late husband’s brother could take my wealth any time they wish, and that would leave my sons destitute. No, I fear that I must rush myself for their sake. And it is all right. He is a fine man,” she said.

For a long moment, they were both quiet, lost to their thoughts on the unfairness of the matter. But his aunt quickly changed her demeanour and the subject.

“You distracted me,” she said. “We must return to the important topic at hand. Tell me all about this young woman and what changed your mind regarding marriage once you met her,” she said.

Milton tried not to laugh as he prepared to tell the story.

“Well, it is really, very strange. I met her at a ball one evening. Actually, we have passed by one another many times, and her dearest friend recently married James,” he said.

“Oh! Lord Haverdell. Yes, I heard that he married just days ago, was it not?” she asked.

“Indeed, it was. And he is very happy. I am so glad that he finally managed to get down the aisle with her as he loved her for a very long time,” Milton said.

“How lovely! And her friend is the young woman you are now courting?” she asked.

“Yes, she is. Lady Tess Oakley. She is a wonderful young woman, and we actually have a great deal in common. She, too, was frightened by the idea of marriage. She dislikes thinking that she may be owned by someone,” Milton said.

“Well, you would never treat her in that way, I am sure. Anyway, it is good that the two of you are so similar. However, I did always suspect that your reasons for not marrying were less to do with the fears of marriage than the fears that your bride may…well…” Thea trailed off.

Milton knew exactly what she was about to say. He feared that his bride may *suffer the same fate.*

After the past three generations of women in his family, he had every reason to worry, but Milton understood that many people considered it nonsense. Still, he would not allow them to mock him or think him a fool. The truth was that they had all been lost, and his wife could easily experience the same thing. If that were to happen, he would never forgive himself. His aunt was clearly only mentioning it because she was concerned for him, but Milton was unable to let go of the pain of the past.

Indeed, he was stuck, locked in by all that he had experienced. There was nothing he could do to escape the past or to overcome what he had been through with his own mother. And now, he loved a woman but could not allow himself to give her his heart, or he would be broken and burdened by the loss of her as well.

“And the boys?” Milton asked, changing the subject quickly.

“Yes!” she said, apparently grateful for the change. “Yes, they are doing quite well. I am so very happy about the fact that they were able to enjoy so much culture while we were gone,” she said.

“It sounds as though you had a marvellous time,” he replied.

“We did, indeed. And I am hopeful that we may go again one day,” she said.

“Perhaps, in the future, we may all go together. You and Lord Danvers and the boys, along with me and Lady Oakley,” he said, wishing that it could actually happen one day.

“That is a lovely image,” she said. “Yes, we must hope for that to happen one day. Perhaps we shall find time to do so very soon after I am married, as I expect you shall already be.”

“Perhaps,” he said, smiling against the sadness in his heart that recognised he would never actually get to marry Lady Oakley. Milton scolded himself internally for even thinking about the possibility of travelling to Italy together.

“Well, are you planning to propose right away? Have you made the decision as to when you will do so?” she asked.

“I am not certain yet, but I hope that I may within the week,” he

replied, still wondering whether or not Lady Oakley would allow him to propose at all.

“Within the week? I have returned just in time! I should be delighted to celebrate with you and Lady Oakley. And I would love to meet her as soon as possible,” she said.

“Yes, we must arrange for it,” he said.

“Very well. I expect that we shall do so very soon. I am so happy that this has all worked out so well for you, Milton. You seem very happy, and you deserve that. I know that you were anxious for a long time about what the future may hold for you regarding a wife and I am relieved to know that you have overcome those fears and have set them aside in order to find your own happiness,” she said.

“Thank you, Aunt Thea. Thank you,” he said.

For the rest of the evening, Milton enjoyed time with his aunt and his cousins, playing with the young boys and teasing them. He wished to be a good example to them. In the past, his selfishness and fickle nature had stopped him from truly caring about how he might be viewed, but now he began to think about how he would want his own children to see him.

Surely, he would wish for his sons to be respectable young men, nothing like the rake that he was reputed to be. It was shameful that he had allowed himself to be seen that way for so long, and Milton no longer wanted to allow for that. It was time that he be the man he was always meant to be.

From now on, he determined, he would endeavour to make his aunt proud through his behaviour, and he would be a wonderful role model to his cousins, as well as being very present in their lives so that they might know how much he cared for them. Yes, they would eventually have a father in Lord Danvers, but that day was in the future, and he did not need to worry about it just yet.

By the end of the evening, Milton was ready to depart, and he said his farewells to his family before setting out for home.

“It really was marvellous to see you,” his aunt said. “I do hope that the next time you come around, you will be bringing your intended. You must tell me at once when you are engaged.”

“I promise that I shall. You will be the first to know. And when that day comes, we will arrange to visit you,” he said.

“Excellent. I look forward to it,” she replied.

With that, Milton made his way home and arrived at the large manor with only a few greetings to the staff.

“And here is a letter for you, Your Grace,” the maid said.

“Thank you, Miss Wesley,” he said, taking the letter from her.

Milton made his way to his room and opened the letter to see that it

was from Lady Oakley. His heart raced with excitement, and, once he read her words, he was a mix of delightful joy and sheer dread.

She had accepted his offer, and he was able to help her. This was wonderful news. He would have the opportunity to do something kind for her, and he hoped that it would truly make a difference in her life.

But it meant pretending to be engaged to her when, for the first time in his life, he actually wanted to be. For the first time, he had hope that there could be something beautiful for him with a woman.

No matter what, Milton was ready. He would not abandon Lady Oakley. He would go to her the next day, and he would propose. If she broke off the engagement in a matter of months, he would accept it as his duty. He had a commitment, and he would hold to it, but nothing beyond that mattered. If his own heart was wounded by the decisions he had made, he would suffer the consequences of that.

What he would not do, however, was risk the chance of her being unhappy. That was simply impossible. Lady Oakley deserved to escape Lord Stanton, and Milton would make that happen, no matter what.

Chapter 21

When Tess saw the coach come to a stop outside of her home, her heart began to pound. She saw Lord Corrington come out of the coach with a single red rose in his hand. It was an exquisite gesture.

Tess hurriedly made her way to the drawing room, where she sat patiently and waited until her mother would come running. It was only a short time before that happened, with her mother rushing to the room in a tizzy, eyes wide with glee.

“He is here!” she exclaimed in a loud whisper.

“Who, Mother?” she asked in reply.

“Lord Corrington. And he has a rose. He has come to see you. Oh, I do believe this must be it. Are you ready, Tess? Come, let me have a look at you. Thank goodness you woke up earlier today so that you may be presentable,” her mother said, rushing around and looking Tess up and down.

“Indeed, Mother, I am glad that I look all right. Do you really think he has come for a reason other than to visit me and see me once more?” she asked.

“Hush! I am certain that he must have learned of the proposal from Lord Stanton and has come to make his own. And if he has not, I shall find a way to inform him that Lord Stanton has done so in order that he must make a very quick decision,” her mother said.

Tess couldn't help but smile at that thought. She was grateful that her mother was willing to create competition as needed in order that Tess might end up with the man she preferred.

They sat in the drawing room, posed as though they had been busy doing proper things, with her mother mid-stitch and Tess holding a book in her hands, gazing at the pages but not really seeing the words as her anticipation was simply too high.

The maid entered the room and gave a gentle curtsy.

"My ladies, Lord Corrington is here to see you," she said.

"Send him in," Tess's mother said in a sweet voice.

Tess and her mother stood as Lord Corrington entered the room, his piercing, blue eyes landing on Tess before he bowed.

"Lord Corrington, how lovely to see you. If you will excuse me, I shall just speak with the maid in the kitchen about refreshments," Tess's mother said, urging the maid out of the room and going along with her.

After a moment, Tess and Lord Corrington were on their own. There was still every chance that her mother was not truly in the kitchen but was listening to them instead. She hoped that Lord Corrington would recognise that and not say a word as to their own arrangement.

He glanced out the door with a raised brow, and Tess followed his gaze to see that her mother's sleeve was still in view. Indeed, her mother had gone nowhere.

"Well…Lady Oakley…" he began hesitantly.

Tess understood that it was very uncomfortable for them both that her mother was there. Instead of enduring the stage moment, Tess decided she could not abide it any longer.

"Forgive me, Lord Corrington, but there seems to be a draft. I understand propriety, but if you would not mind, I should like to close the door. My mother is sure to return momentarily, so I do not expect that there shall be any question as to the proper nature of your visit," Tess said.

"Certainly, Lady Oakley. You may close it," he said.

"Thank you, Your Grace," she replied, making her way to the door.

Tess gave her mother a pleading look as she reached for the handle and her mother rolled her eyes before nodding in agreement that she would leave. Tess waited but a moment before her mother was far enough down the hall that Tess trusted she really would give them a bit of privacy. After that, she closed the door and turned to Lord Corrington.

“She is gone now,” she said in a hushed tone. “You need not be anxious.”

“Thank you, Lady Oakley,” he said.

“I trust you received my letter?” Tess asked.

“I did, indeed. I am sorry that you have been put in such a position as this, having to relent to a proposal from another man when you would rather not marry at all,” he said.

“Yes, well, I know that you do not wish to marry either. I hope that this does what you want and prevents others from ever trying in the future to gain your attention,” Tess said.

Lord Corrington winced and something in his eye told Tess that her words had hurt him in an unexpected way. She wondered what it could be that might cause him to feel that way. Surely he was unbothered by her desire to aid him in his goals of avoiding marriage. He had been so determined, just as she had once been.

“Lord Stanton came by yesterday. He was going on about how he hoped that you had not yet proposed. I eventually had to send him away,” she said. “I wonder why he still has any hope for me when I have been rather rude to him at times.”

“I believe he has a bit of a blind spot for rudeness. Honestly, I think he considers that no one is able to dislike him enough that they are intentionally rude, and he seems to think that people are only ever trying to speak well of him, even when it is obvious to the contrary. I

have never met a man with more arrogance," Lord Corrington confessed.

"Nor have I. He said that he did not wish for you to steal something which belonged to him. As though I am a cravat or a top hat!" Tess exclaimed, scoffing at the memory.

"That is a dreadful thing to have said to you. I am sorry you had to suffer it," Lord Corrington apologised.

"It is hardly your fault. He is absolutely the most appalling man I have ever met in all my life," Tess said.

"I had an incident with him just two days ago," Lord Corrington said, cheeks burning with a kind of shame.

"Oh? What happened?" she asked.

"I may or may not have deeply insulted him at the club. You know I have no taste for his father, and Lord Stanton was busily praising him for being such a hero to the British empire," Lord Corrington said.

"Goodness, that is awful. I cannot imagine what was going through his mind as he praised such a man," Tess said.

"Nor I. Anyway, I think I would have embarrassed him if he was the sort of man who could be embarrassed," he said.

Tess laughed at that and shook her head.

“I fear he is not,” she said.

“No, indeed,” he replied.

“Very well, then. So how shall we proceed? Are you certain that you are comfortable with our arrangement? I do not wish for you to be forced into anything, but this would aid you in preventing any more young women or their mothers and fathers from trying to harness you,” Tess said.

“Indeed, yes, of course,” he said nervously. “Well, I suppose that there is only one thing for it.”

“Oh?”

Tess’s heart continued to race as Lord Corrington stood, and he reached into his pocket. He came and knelt before her, his eyes full of some emotion she could not quite read. It was clear that he was, indeed, struggling against something in his heart, but Tess was not sure what it was. She knew, with certainty, that her own heart was filled with hope. She longed to be engaged to him yet dreaded the fact that it was all just a farce.

“Lady Oakley,” he began, at full volume in case anyone could hear them and might be wondering about this proposal.

“Yes, your Grace?” she asked, nervously trying to breathe.

“For many years, I vowed to never marry. I had no desire for it, and I believed that I am simply not a man meant for such a union. I feared the very idea of it, thinking that it is a coffin for a man, that marriage requires him to lose everything that makes him who he is,” he said.

“I worried that marrying a woman meant I would never enjoy myself again, that I would be stuck with someone who was no more to me than a past affection, grown bitter and boring with time,” Lord Corrington continued.

He paused for a long moment and looked Tess directly in the eye. She felt his gaze, felt his emotion, felt his struggle. She could not be sure what it was that he struggled against, thinking that he must have a reason for finding it so difficult to finish what he was trying to say. It made little sense that he would struggle with this fake proposal unless he did not wish to continue in their charade.

However, it was clear that he would. No matter what he was finding so difficult, Tess could see that he was willing to try.

“Lady Oakley, you have changed everything for me,” he finally said. “You are unlike any other woman I have ever known, and I find you to be the loveliest, most astonishing creature. You are beautiful, kind, unique, and clever.

“You can be acerbic, but only when you know it is appropriate and that only makes you wittier,” he said teasingly. “And you are also gentle and gracious when the time calls for it, which I find to be a

remarkable contrast."

Tess laughed and fought against the tears that pricked at her eyes. If the proposal had been real, she would have been so happy. But knowing that it was false only made it more difficult for her.

When Lord Corrington took her hand in his, and she saw the passion in his eyes, she struggled to fight against her hopes once more.

"Lady Oakley, all these things lead me to my next question, a question you must surely be expecting by now," he said.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Will you consent to be my wife? Will you marry me and spend your life with me?" he asked.

"I will," Tess said in a rush before she could give herself a moment to think.

Lord Corrington embraced her, and she leaned into him. If the moment were any other, if it were a true proposal or if her family had been there, she was not sure he would have given her this sign of affection. But as it was, as they engaged in this strange and suddenly painful display, Tess simply allowed herself to enjoy the moment of being close to him.

"My bride," he whispered softly, only making it more painful for Tess.

She expected that her mother would be nearby at this point, but she would not have heard that tender utterance. Tess wondered for whom he had said it. After all, there was no one to perform for in that moment. So, instead of worrying about it, Tess simply took in the words and enjoyed that he had said them. Although she was not privy to enjoying anything more from him, she would take this moment and delight in the beauty of it.

A moment later, they pulled apart, and it was painful, but Tess knew it was important. Just then, her mother entered the room with a wide grin on her face, behaving as though she was unaware of what had taken place within the room.

“Forgive me, have I interrupted your conversation?” she asked.

Lord Corrington sat, and Tess did the same as he looked to her mother.

“Indeed, Lady Daleshire, you have interrupted nothing. Rather, I am glad that you have returned that I might inform you that I have proposed marriage to Lady Oakley, and she has accepted,” he announced.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “Oh, how wonderful!”

“Yes, Mother, it is. I am delighted to be engaged to Lord Corrington,” Tess said, trying to contain her swath of emotions.

“And I am delighted that you have accepted my proposal. Thank you, Lady Oakley, for consenting to be my bride,” Lord Corrington said.

“Your father is going to be delighted. I expect that he will be more than happy with this turn of events. Lord Corrington, I trust that you shall make every effort to take care of my daughter?” her mother asked.

“You have my word, Lady Daleshire. I promise to be an excellent husband,” he promised.

“Very well, then. In that case, I suggest that we celebrate. Minnie!” her mother shouted at the last.

The maid rushed in with a tray full of small cakes and other desserts. Tess tried not to laugh, but she was thankful that her mother was at least happy about it all. Still, even as her mother made every effort to celebrate, Tess struggled with her own thoughts. She had to fight against the sadness that threatened to overwhelm her in the midst of realising she would soon be forced to end this engagement, and all the celebrations would be for nought.

It was desperately sad that she would have to let go. All the joy that she hoped to feel in that moment would be nothing soon enough. Lord Corrington would be out of her life, a memory of a time when she had been happy and had been made to forget it all for the sake of a foolish arrangement made in her youth.

Tess recognised that it was too late to undo it. She could not make it right, make it better. She had decided to find a way out of what her mother and father wanted for her and, instead, discovered something

she wanted for herself. Now that she was having to let go of that, Tess stoically concluded that she had no other choice but to accept her fate and move on.

“When shall we plan for the wedding?” her mother asked with excitement.

Tess and Lord Corrington looked at one another, both uncertain. They needed to draw out the engagement long enough that they could break it off without Lord Stanton jumping back into Tess’s life. But if they were to draw it out too long, her mother would be greatly displeased.

“Lady Daleshire, I shall need to discuss the matter with my family. My aunt is currently in mourning, but I expect that she will be marrying shortly after. If she would prefer that I wait until after her wedding, I fear that I must. She has been like a mother to me,” Lord Corrington said.

Tess saw her mother’s smile falter, but she nodded and took Lord Corrington’s hand in her own.

“That is a very kind thing, Your Grace. Yes, you must discuss the matter with her first and then let us know what you wish for,” she said.

The thought of it all was overwhelming for Tess, and she simply wanted some fresh air, space to breathe and understand what she had done. But more than that, she wanted it all to be true.

She wanted love. She even wanted marriage.

Chapter 22

Milton was delighted to receive a card from James, stating that he was coming around that afternoon. Knowing that his friend had returned from his honeymoon early, Milton was curious as to why but also eager to see him.

James arrived in a splendid mood, perfectly happy and looking well as he came into the study where Milton was already resting with a glass of brandy.

“What are you doing back so soon?” Milton asked.

“We were visiting Rue’s extended family in the north when she received a letter that her mother was ill. We returned to find that she was already recovered, and it was nothing more than a little scare. I do hope that we have a chance to go out again for a longer period of time, but it is what it is,” James said.

“I am terribly sorry that you had to return early,” Milton said.

“Indeed, I know. It was rather disappointing, but I am just relieved that her mother is all right. Now, tell me how you have been whilst we were gone. Is all well here?” James asked.

“Yes, all is well. In fact, there have been some rather grand changes,” he said, wondering how James would feel about the news that Milton and Lady Oakley were going to be married.

“Changes? Oh? What sort of changes?” James asked.

“You will not believe it; I can assure you of that. But I am rather excited to tell you about it,” Milton said.

“Out with it, man! I wish to know exactly what it is, whether I would believe it or not,” James said.

“In that case, I am pleased to tell you that I have proposed to Lady Oakley, and we are to be married,” he announced with a grin on his face.

For a long moment, James stared at him in shock. At last, however, he appeared to gather himself and get over the initial surprise.

“You are engaged?”

“I am. We are,” he said, correcting himself. “We intend to be married, although we have not yet been able to choose an exact date.”

“Truly?”

“You do not seem happy,” Milton said, surveying his friend’s face.

“I am. I am very happy. But I am astonished. You cannot fault me for that. After all, just a matter of a few weeks ago, you were determined never to marry. Now, here you are, engaged. You have only been courting her for a short time,” he said.

“I know that, but the circumstance is rather unique, you see. I have fallen in love with her. Lady Oakley had already received a proposal from Lord Stanton, and I could not abide the thought of missing out on a future together because of that. I knew that I had to act at once. This was what had to be done if I am to be with her as I wish,” he said.

“Are you certain that you have made this decision because you love her and not merely as a means of punishing Lord Stanton? I know that you detest the man, and I cannot fault you for that, but an engagement is a rather extreme measure to undertake if that was, indeed, your reasoning,” James said.

“I wish that you would not question me on this. I would never use a woman for the sake of making another man angry or jealous. You think I would be the sort of man to do that?” Milton asked, deeply offended that James was even questioning this matter.

“No, I do not. But I also did not think that you would ever propose to a woman after courting her for such a short period. Now, please let us move on from this. I am happy for you. Whatever surprise I am trying to express, I want you to know that I am happy and you have my utmost support,” James said.

This calmed Milton somewhat, although he was still upset that James would think that he was doing all of this only for the sake of making Lord Stanton angry. To Milton, any time spent in an effort to anger Lord Stanton would be time completely wasted. After all, it was not Lord Stanton he cared about. His love for Lady Oakley was

significantly greater than his dislike for Lord Stanton.

“Please know that whatever decision I have made, it is because I care for her. I know that it may surprise some, but it is possible to fall in love with a woman instantly. I know this because I have now experienced it,” Milton said.

“It truly is remarkable to see you in this place, feeling the way that you feel about her. I am delighted. I am certain that Rue shall also be quite pleased, and I cannot wait to hear how she responds when she finds out,” James said.

“Yes, I expect that Lady Oakley will be telling her at once. They are so close, and your charming wife will, I hope, be all right with the match?” Milton asked, hopeful.

“I have no doubt that she will support it. She will be so happy that Lady Oakley has found someone that I have little doubt she will jump at the opportunity to support her friend in this newfound match. Now, as for this matter, I think that you and I must go out and celebrate,” James said.

Milton tried to be as positive and excited as he could, but underneath it all, he was still finding it difficult. As the two men left Milton’s home and climbed into the coach, James turned to Milton.

“Are you all right? I say, it seems as though something is bothering you. For a man eager to be getting married, I would not anticipate that you would feel this way,” James said.

“Indeed, I am very eager. There is nothing in this that I am unhappy about,” Milton insisted.

“Then why do you seem so unhappy? Or distracted?” James asked.

“It is difficult to say,” Milton said. “I am eager to marry her, and I do not know what it is about my demeanour that makes you believe otherwise.”

“Come now, I cannot believe you if you are behaving in this way. It is perfectly clear that you are hiding something from me. What is going on? Why are you unhappy about this engagement?” James pushed.

Milton could not tell him. Although James was his dearest friend, it was impossible for him to be honest about the arrangement that he had come up with between himself and Lady Oakley. It was unfair that he should have to lie to his friend, but it was no matter. This was all he could do, and there was no way to change that.

“Forgive me, James, but I cannot say another word on the subject. I love Lady Oakley, and I am eager to marry her. Whatever else you suspect, you must know this to be true,” Milton said.

“True or not, you are hiding something from me,” James said.

“Why are you so disturbed and convinced that I am hiding something from you? Am I not allowed to simply go about my day and enjoy my exciting news with you? You ought to be happy for me, not suspicious of me. I dislike how you are urging me to confess something grand and disturbing. Can you not simply be delighted that I have found

happiness, or are you angry because you have just found your own and you do not wish to share it?" Milton asked, accusing James.

"I beg your pardon? You think me that sort of man? I would never behave in such a way. I am asking you because I have a good deal of concern and for good reason. You are not yourself. I would simply like to know why and if I may be of any support to you. It makes no sense that you are behaving so anxiously. You are not yourself, and do not be angry with me for noticing as such," James said.

Milton sighed and shook his head as the coach began to move. How could he explain it? He wanted James to leave him alone and stop arguing on this point, but it was clear that James was worried and would not relent. Milton could not blame him for that, instead being grateful that he had such a caring friend. Still, he didn't want to discuss it. If he started to share even the slightest hint about what was bothering him, everything would unravel.

He needed James to believe the ruse, to believe that Milton and Lady Oakley were going to be married. How could he explain that he was in agony over knowing that this would come to an end soon enough? How could he possibly share that she would then be ending the engagement? And how could he explain the reason behind all these years of refusing to marry and having such a dreadful attitude about the entire idea of marriage?

No, it would make no sense to James. He would not understand Milton's decision or the reasons behind it. Instead, he would feel that it was a strange and unusual choice, which was a reasonable enough thing to believe. After all, Milton understood as well that this was a strange thing he was doing. His love for Lady Oakley had blossomed throughout their arrangement and was now full. But it was that very thing keeping them apart.

Still, James was eyeing him with frustration, and Milton understood that James would not relent. He would have to say something and, instead of making something up, he decided to simply buy himself time.

“I shall tell you eventually, in time. But, for now, I cannot share with you the reason behind my strange demeanour,” he said, leaving it vague. Milton decided that he would tell James in the future after Lady Oakley ended the engagement. At that time, it would be all right to tell James everything, to bear his soul and lay down the burden. After all, he would need a friend at that point.

He could tell James all about the struggles he had faced with loving Lady Oakley but not being able to marry her. He would be able to share the history of the women in his family and all they had suffered. He would be able to let go of all the pain that he had been fighting over the past few years and finally accept that he was bound to be alone but that he would make it through nevertheless.

“You mean to tell me that there is, indeed, something wrong, but you cannot or will not speak with your closest friend to tell him exactly what that is?” James asked.

“I understand that you are frustrated, but there is nothing I can do at the moment, James. It is something I may not share. You must understand that I do not like keeping anything from you, but this is something which must remain concealed. Now, may we please move on?” Milton asked.

James held up a hand to quiet him.

“Just answer me one, single question,” James said.

“As you wish,” Milton replied.

“Do you love her?”

Milton finally smiled a genuine smile at that question. It was not a difficult one to answer by any means. He was delighted, in fact, to tell James the truth on this point.

“I love her with all my heart in ways that I never imagined possible,” he confessed.

“That is all I need to know for the time being,” James said. “If you truly love her, I can support the fact that you wish to marry her. It is only if you do not have a genuine affection for her that I would be angry with you.”

“Then you need not be angry because my love for Lady Oakley is true and pure, and I shall never grow beyond it. More than anyone else in all my life, she matters to me,” he said.

“I am pleased to hear it. I am shocked, as I said, because you were a man who had vowed to never marry, and you behaved as though you held nothing but contempt for marriage at all, but if you really do love her, then I cannot be displeased with your decision to marry her. Now, what does this mean for the future? You will, no doubt, be married quickly?” he asked.

Once more, that question arose, and Milton tried to think through it. How long would it take Lord Stanton to back off and leave Lady Oakley alone? How long would Milton need to maintain the image he had put forth?

“It is all still to be decided,” he said. “But I am confident that she and I will be very happy when the day comes. That is all that matters, is it not?”

“Yes, I suppose you are right. I am eager to know what this secret of yours is, but if this is all you will tell me, I shall try to remain pleased, and I assure you that you will have my support in whatever choices you make. Just inform me before you plan the entirety of the wedding, and I may be able to help you avoid some of the errors in judgment we made,” James said.

“What errors in judgment?” Milton asked.

“Have you any idea as to the cost of a grand choir?” James asked, scoffing and shaking his head.

Milton laughed, quite certain that he would not be arranging for any choirs or any weddings in his lifetime. But he had to let James believe otherwise, even just long enough for the charade to play out until Lady Oakley was free to live her life as she pleased.

“Truly, it was a silly thing to have paid for, but it was one of the things which Rue most desired. Oh, well, you shall understand soon enough. As the husband, we must give our wives whatever they wish. Lady Oakley, I am sure, will have tastes of her own, and you will do a very fine job of granting her requests,” James said.

“I shall make every effort,” Milton said, once more pushing against everything he hoped for. If he could not have the life he wanted with Lady Oakley, he could dream about it. One day, if he was fortunate enough, they would find one another again in their old age, both ready to start their life together, even as it was coming to a close.

Chapter 23

“My darling Rue!” Tess exclaimed upon seeing her friend. She had been overjoyed when the card came, stating that Rue was back in London and wished to pay a call on Tess. She had hardly been able to wait until Rue arrived.

“Dear Tess, oh, how I missed you! I am so happy to have come back and that I may see you now. How has it been for you this last week? My husband has told me of your rather shocking news!” She said in a hurry as they made their way to Tess’s bedroom, where they might be able to speak in private and in confidence.

“Yes, I know that you must be shocked, but there it is. You told me that you believed Lord Corrington and I would make a lovely couple and, there you have it! It has happened. I do love him very much, Rue. You were right,” Tess admitted, although she could not tell Rue the rest of it.

“I am delighted to hear this. Now, tell me all about it. How did the proposal take place? And what of Lord Stanton? I thought you needed to give him an answer as soon as possible. How did he take the news that you are not going to marry him? Oh, and do tell me everything you wish for the wedding!” Rue said.

Tess opened her mouth to speak but then froze. There was so much to say, and Rue had asked so many questions. How could she possibly answer them all?

“Well, I suppose it is all rather complicated to answer all of that,” she said nervously.

“Complicated? How so?” Rue asked.

“You see, Lord Corrington and myself are very eager to be engaged. We both spent so long being against marriage, but once we found one another, everything changed,” she began.

“Yes, of course, I can see that,” Rue said.

“Indeed, I am so happy that he and I have found one another. I do not think either of us would have been so keen on another person if we had the option,” Tess said, knowing that, for her part, she would never love another man aside from Lord Corrington.

“Well, you still have not answered my questions,” Rue said.

“Yes, of course. As for how he proposed, it was remarkable. He came to the estate, and my mother left the room, and he was so kind and gentle with me. He went down on his knee, took my hand, asked me to be his bride. He told me how much he cared for me and then—most innocently, mind you—he even embraced me,” Tess confessed.

She considered making mention of those sweet words he spoke about her being his bride, but Tess couldn’t help saving that just for herself. There was no need to share it with anyone when it had been something he had said to her only. That was their own, private moment. Tess didn’t want to share it with anyone else.

“How romantic! He embraced you? He is a rake, I know, but if he did so innocently, I suppose there is no harm in it,” Rue said.

“Please do not continue calling him a rake,” Tess said. “Now that we are to be married, I do believe that he has proven himself to be nothing of the sort.”

“Oh, dear, you are correct. Forgive me. That was rather rude, was it not?” Rue apologised.

“I understand. I know the reputation he once had, but I do not wish for it to follow him any longer. He is such a wonderful man, and when you look at the rumours, it is very difficult to find anything to substantiate the claims. He was a flirt, yes, but there is nothing to say that he ever did anything else improper beyond that,” Tess said, living in the denial that it was possible, simply because she did not wish to think about it.

“All right, you are correct. I am very sorry for calling him a rake. Anyway, forget that. I wish to know more,” Rue said.

“As for the wedding, I honestly have not considered much about it. We have only just become engaged, and we are not sure when the wedding will be. I cannot try to think about what sort of flowers I want when I do not even know the season for the wedding,” Tess said.

“I suppose that is true. But what else? Oh, I had more questions, did I not?” Rue asked, trying to think.

Tess had no desire to remind Rue of what she had forgotten. She much

preferred to pretend that she had no idea what else Rue wanted to know. However, Rue remembered soon enough and looked at Tess with wild eyes.

“Oh, yes! Lord Stanton. How did he respond? Was he terribly angry? I can only imagine,” Rue said, wanting to know.

Tess sighed and looked away from Rue, not wanting to speak of it.

“He is to come this afternoon, and I shall have to tell him. I do not expect him to accept it with ease. More than likely, he shall be furious, and I am going to regret having told him at all,” Tess said.

“Oh, dear, that is quite a challenge. I am certain that you will do your best, although I know that it sounds positively miserable to consider. Maybe you shall be fortunate, and he will simply accept it. You never know. Try to stay positive,” Rue said.

“I shall try,” Tess replied, although she couldn’t imagine anything about it going well.

Rue stayed for a while longer, and it was a tremendous time, getting to catch up and to hear all about married life. It was remarkable how something Tess had never before desired sounded suddenly new and wonderful, as though it was the most important thing in all the world. She wanted it, but only if she was able to marry Lord Corrington.

And that was not going to happen.

After Rue departed, Tess had only a brief period of time alone before Lord Stanton arrived. She was terribly anxious as she heard his feet coming down the hallways to where she sat in the drawing room, awaiting him. Her mother had not yet joined them, and, Tess suspected, she would not.

That morning, her mother had been frantically anxious about Lord Stanton coming and the fact that Tess was going to refuse him. She had told Tess to be delicate but to get it over quickly. Tess believed that her mother had hopes that she would not be forced to face his wrath in light of Tess's decision.

"Lady Oakley," he greeted, coming into the room with a sweeping bow.

"Good afternoon, Lord Stanton," she replied in a stiff manner, curtsying and then sitting and gesturing for him to do the same.

He was dressed in a very fine outfit and, although he was often clothed in such a way, Tess was certain that he had dressed very fine for this occasion. It was clear that this was important to him and that he still had hope that she might accept his proposal, which she found perfectly ridiculous as she had made it clear to him that she was not interested. Nevertheless, Tess did her best to be kind.

"Lord Stanton, I do know why you have come today. I understand that we have something very important to discuss, and I know that you are looking for an answer," Tess said.

"All I am looking for is the promise of which day we may set for our wedding," he said in a lofty way.

“I beg your pardon?” Tess asked, frustrated that he had made such an assumption.

“Oh, Lady Oakley, I cannot wait to be your husband. You know that I am going to give you everything you could ever hope for. Your life shall be splendid in every way. Believe me, you are going to love everything that awaits you,” he said.

But Tess was still disturbed by his demeanour and the fact that he was behaving as though she was already his and that she might ever belong to him as some *thing* rather than a wife and a person in her own right.

“Lord Stanton, I have not yet given you my answer,” she said.

“You need not give me any answer. I know what is in your heart, as I know what is in mine. You, like any young woman of a sensible nature, would love to be my bride. It is perfectly understandable, but I urge you not to gush over the opportunity. We shall simply move forward together, henceforth,” he said.

“Lord Stanton,” Tess said in a firm voice. “I have no desire to marry you. I have given my consent to marry Lord Corrington yesterday. I tell you this not out of any anger or frustration—although you do incite those qualities in me—but so that you no longer put yourself through this strange and unfortunate determination which you have in your idea of marrying me.”

Lord Stanton froze and looked at the floor in defeat and fury. Tess was

utterly unsure as to how he would respond. Not only had she refused his proposal, but she had insulted him. Certainly, her insult was a matter of her own personal dignity, but he would not see it that way. She knew that he would be angry and that many would agree he had a right to be. Many men would have been furious just the same after what she had said.

"You are refusing me?" he finally asked.

"Yes, Lord Stanton. I am refusing you," she said.

"But why?"

"I have told you time and time again in the past that I do not believe we are a good match. That remains true," she said.

"And what is the reason you are so indifferent on this? I cannot comprehend why a young woman who appears so sensible would make such a childish, nonsensical decision," he said, as though trying to pay her back for the insult.

"Lord Stanton, I am not the sort of woman you wish for me to be. I am sorry to say that I would greatly disappoint you as a wife, and I cannot change that. But you must know that I am doing the very best thing. I know that you are angry, but—"

"Angry?" he scoffed. "I am not angry. I never said I was angry. You ought not to make such swift judgments as that."

But even as he denied it, Tess could see the underlying fury in his eyes. She knew that she was perfectly right and understanding very well that he was, in every way, angry. Although she could not understand how to overcome his anger, Tess was not going to relent and allow herself to be subjected to it. If he chose to lash out or even to become violent, Tess would still remain firm.

“I am glad to hear it,” she said, evenly, as though she believed him.

“Yes, well, I suppose that is just one of the many things you misunderstood about me. I can see that we are not the sort of man and woman who belong together, as you have addressed, but I love you, and I cannot accept that you really would rather be married to that dreadful man than to me,” he said.

“Begging your pardon once more, I fear that it is true, and you must accept it, regardless of how you feel on the matter,” Tess said.

He maintained a stoic posture, but it was clear to Tess that he was furiously angry and would not likely acquiesce to her decision. But Tess knew that he would have to figure it out eventually. After all, she had sent him away during his last visit, and she was now engaged to another man. If he could not accept this, there was something desperately wrong.

“I am very sorry for having hurt you,” Tess said.

“Are you?” he challenged.

Tess realised that she could not honestly say as much. She wanted to be polite, but the reality was that she was not unhappy. She had not set out to hurt him or make him angry, but it had happened regardless, and Tess could do nothing to change it. She was furious about the fact that he had behaved so immaturely, and all she wanted was to be rid of him once more.

“I take no pleasure in hurting you, and that is the truest answer I am able to give,” she clarified.

“Well then, in that case, I suppose it is easy to understand the sort of woman you are. You and that betrothed of yours deserve one another. He is a terrible man, and you are quite fitting to belong with him,” Lord Stanton said.

Tess understood that it was meant as an insult, but she could not take it as one. All she could think about was how badly she wished that Lord Corrington saw it that way. She wished that he could understand her feelings and that he would come to love her as she was beginning to love him.

However, it was Lord Stanton who stood before her, trying to manipulate the situation so that they might be together. Tess would not allow for that. She would fight as hard as she needed to fight in order to avoid a match with him. She had lied to avoid it; she would continue to lie. Anything that needed to be done to prevent an engagement with him, she was more than willing to do.

But now, alas, Tess was simply relieved that she and Lord Stanton would never be together, and he would have to accept it. She had succeeded, and that was the most important thing she could consider at the time. They were over, and he would have to move on.

“Now, Lord Stanton, would you like to remain here and try to insult me some more, or would you prefer to depart and leave this estate at once?” she asked.

“Are you sending me away again? You are the rudest, most ignorant girl I have ever met,” he said.

“Perhaps that may be so, but I am also bold enough to tell you that I will not be spoken to in that way in my own home. I thank you for your proposal, Lord Stanton, but I must officially refuse it and tell you that I wish you all the best in the hopes of a future spouse,” Tess said, as bravely as she was able.

“And I wish you the same,” he said, trying to appear steady and firm, although Tess could see the way his eye twitched from his anger.

Lord Stanton’s departure was strange, as he left without pageantry and with steady steps. It was clear that he was furious and anything but calm, but his external presence could have been mistaken for contemplation as opposed to anger by anyone who had not been aware of the conversation he had just been involved in. Tess hoped that he would be all right and that he would get over his affection for her.

Meanwhile, Tess hoped that she would recover from her own affection. She hoped to let go of whatever nonsensical hope she still had regarding the Duke of Corrington.

Chapter 24

Milton arrived home after an evening with James at the club. James had departed rather early in order to get home to his wife, and as a dear friend, Milton left along with him and stopped by the estate to greet the newest Lady Haverdell.

“I am so delighted for you,” Milton said. “Truly, you made such a lovely bride, and I am glad that you and my dear friend have found one another. James is an excellent husband, I am sure,” he said.

“Of course he is,” Rue gushed. “He is marvellous. That is why I married him in the first place. I knew that he would be a good husband, and I was perfectly correct. I love him a great deal, and he has taken such excellent care of me.”

“I am glad to hear it, most definitely,” he said.

“And I am glad to hear about your news,” Rue said in reply.

“My news?” He asked.

“Of course! The news that you and Lady Oakley are engaged? It is so wonderful. I could hardly believe it when I heard the good news. But, alas, now I know that the two of you belong together, and it brings me such great joy to know that all is well. You and Tess will be married soon enough, and then, perhaps, we may all enjoy ourselves together. It would be so lovely if we did something grand, such as travelling together,” Rue dreamt.

Milton laughed, thinking how special it would be, but how unreasonable given the circumstances which Rue and James did not yet know about. Still, it was wonderful having a few moments to speak with her and to discuss things such as how much they would all enjoy spending time together once he and Lady Oakley were married.

A part of him was beginning to wonder what that was going to look like moving forward anyway. If he and Lady Oakley were both such good friends with this couple, they were highly likely to come across one another rather frequently. It would be so painful, but he would have to endure it all for the sake of their friends.

Indeed, he was not sure how he would be able to go on, seeing her all the time, just as he was surprised that they had not been around one another and met more frequently prior to the night they first truly interacted. But he was certain that they would, eventually, be forced to be near one another enough that he would struggle to overcome his feelings for Lady Oakley.

“Well, I must be going now,” he said, ready to depart from the estate.

“Please come back soon. We must have you over for dinner,” Rue said.

“Oh, certainly. You and Lady Oakley,” James said.

“I suspect she will need a chaperone for that,” Milton said with a laugh.

“Good heavens, not when she is with me,” Rue retorted. “Her mother adores me and would allow her to come at any time, even if her intended happens to be present. You need not worry, I assure you.”

“I am glad to hear it. If so, you have my word. I shall come one evening for dinner, and I should very much like it if Lady Oakley comes along with me,” he said.

“Yes, indeed. It must happen,” Rue said.

With that, Milton said a final farewell and departed, climbing back into the coach and heading for his home. He could barely stand to remain there, exchanging those pleasantries when they did not even know what was in his heart or how desperately difficult the circumstances were for him. Although he wanted them to believe that all was well, it was painful to let them think as such when he was struggling so deeply inside.

Nevertheless, Milton returned home with his heart balanced on a scale between curiosity and struggle. He wondered what was yet to come, but he knew that it could never be exactly what he hoped for.

Milton walked in the door and immediately saw three letters on the silver tray that he kept there for just such a purpose. He saw that the first was from none other than Lady Oakley herself.

Taking great care to open it, Milton unfolded the letter and began to read.

Dear Lord Corrington,

I hope this letter finds you well. My mother urged me to write to you, saying that letters foster a sense of romance and that men and women who write to one another are far more like to lead a happy life together.

Well, we both know what is behind our engagement, but I could not refuse her. I wish, therefore, to tell you that I am entirely grateful for the fact that you have done all of this for me, and you have worked so hard to ensure my freedom. I feel wretchedly undeserving, and I do believe that I have likely failed you in many ways already, but I shall try to prove myself a decent woman over this next season of our engagement. If there is anything you should need from me, please inform me at once, and it is yours. With all that you have done on my behalf, I would be more than happy to aid you in return.

What a fool I am! I have written all of this without even informing you of the fact that Lord Stanton came around, and I told him that the engagement would not take place, that I had already accepted the offer of another man. He was quite livid, bouncing between insulting me and trying to maintain his pride. Regardless, I was delighted when he finally left, and I was able to enjoy the rest of my day.

Now, I bid you adieu. If my mother continues forcing me to write to you, there is every chance you may receive one or more letters like this each day until this all comes to a conclusion.

Your friend,

Lady Tess Oakley

Milton smiled at her mild whit and folded the letter back up. He was intrigued by the fact that she had told Lord Stanton and was curious to hear more details as to how it went. But he knew that it could not have gone well, and that was enough for now. After putting away the letter, he opened the next, which was from his aunt.

Dearest Milton,

I was so pleased to receive your letter and to learn that you finally proposed to the young woman. I am so happy! We must arrange a dinner at once. First, you must come to me, and we may discuss how you should like for her to be celebrated by your family. I know that this is a grand thing for you, and I wish to do it perfectly.

Having told the boys already, I am excited, and they are as well. We all wish to see you soon. I do hope that you will join us for dinner again once this week and that we may find a way to see one another regularly. Perhaps we might even be able to arrange one or two nights every week in which you come. You may bring this lovely young woman, and we shall all be able to get to know one another.

Anyway, I am happy to hear your news and hope that you will come to tell us more in person this week.

Your aunt,

Thea

Again, Milton was happy at having received this letter. His aunt was

always such a charming and kind woman, and it meant so very much to him to know that she was still there for him, still by his side. He could not wait to see her again and, were the circumstances different, he would be thrilled by the idea of introducing her to Tess.

However, he understood that his aunt and cousins were the only people in all the world who could be negatively impacted by his reputation once Tess ended the engagement. His aunt would be furious with him when the reason for the end would be pinned on his rakish ways.

At times, it felt deeply unfair that he was judged for this when it was something he had allowed to become exaggerated for the sake of protecting himself against the possibility of young women wishing to be with him. He had allowed others to think that he was a rather loose man without restraint because that was a way of maintaining his autonomy and keeping the young women of London safe.

However, as he looked curiously at the third and final letter, Milton had a dreadful feeling that all of his past behaviours were about to catch up to him.

To Lord Milton Eddington, the Duke of Corrington,

You may not know me, but I know you quite well. I wish for you to know that you must bring your engagement to an end. It is imperative that you do so for the sake of your intended's safety. You know of what I speak.

In order to protect her from the thing which brings you so much shame, I am giving you this warning. I shall not give you many warnings, as I expect you to do the right thing and end your engagement at once.

If you do not, my next step will not simply be a letter like this one, but a letter explaining to you precisely what I will have already done. You see, if you continue in this engagement, I will spread rumours about Lady Oakley and yourself.

It will not be hard by any means. After all, who would struggle to believe that the rakish Lord Corrington had indecent liaisons with a noble debutante? It is not as though anyone will struggle to believe me. But this would ruin her reputation far worse than it would touch yours.

As I believe that you do truly care for this young woman, I hope that you will consider this. Think about the importance of looking after her and being sure that she is cared for.

I hope you understand that I mean every word of this. If you do not let go of this engagement, word shall spread like a wildfire that Lady Oakley rushed into her engagement with you in order to hide the fact that the two of you have already risked the possibility that she might be with child. This is the only way to keep her safe.

Sincerely,

A concerned party

Milton was broken by this. At first, he had assumed the threatening letter was a pathetic attempt by Lord Stanton to try and force him to end matters with the woman who was his dream, but this was different. This included a hint towards the terrible trauma which Milton was determined to keep away from Tess.

He could not fathom where this letter had come from or who had written it. Although he hoped that it was no one from amongst his own friends—or that it was from his family, such as his aunt, for that matter—Milton also hoped that it had been written by someone close enough to him that they would be able to discuss the matter as opposed to resorting to the foolish task of leaving letters for one another like this.

He still wondered if it might be Lord Stanton, but with the level of detail in the letter, he could not be certain. Milton decided he would just have to try and figure it all out on his own. Otherwise, he might be forced to ask James to help him and, in that, James would eventually learn the truth about Lady Oakley and Milton's engagement and the fact that it was a farce. He didn't wish for that day to come so soon as James might not understand.

Milton folded the letter back up, deciding that he would deal with the matter the following day. He could not abide it for now, and it was too frustrating to even try. Anxious though he was, Milton hoped that he would never look at the letter again.

He did, however, also wonder whether or not Lady Oakley had also received one.

What he did know was that, no matter what, even after the engagement and their whole charade, he could not marry Lady Oakley. If the author of this letter knew the truth and had discovered his secret, it meant that others might do the same. There would be no way of covering or hiding the mess that he was in or the fact that he had something very tragic to keep away from others.

Milton sat down at his desk and began to write to Lady Oakley, telling

her how much he had enjoyed her letter. In response, he tried to be witty and clever but fell very short, which caused him to grieve a great deal.

Nevertheless, he was simply happy about the fact that he and Lady Oakley could share these moments, even through writing. But now that her reputation was being threatened by this lie from a coward, Milton realised that he had very few choices left to him. He needed to get this out of the way, to find a way to get her to end the engagement even though it was too soon.

He thought that, perhaps, her mother and father would have at least seen that she was capable of attracting the attention of a man other than Lord Stanton. If they had, they might be willing to allow her a chance to find another man or to at least simply escape the arrangement with Lord Stanton.

No matter what happened and no matter what was decided, Milton knew that he needed to give her some time and give her a chance to be on her own and maintain her reputation. He didn't wish to end the engagement, but he could at least tell her about it. That way, she could decide whether or not she wished to end it. If her reputation mattered enough to her that she would break away from him, at least he would know how much or little he meant to her. But if she could avoid a marriage to Lord Stanton, did she even need him at all?

The question plagued Milton as he folded and unfolded the letter, reading it through again and again until, finally, he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 25

Tess was eager to spend another day with Lord Corrington. They had made plans to see one another for a walk at Hyde Park, and it was a relief to be able to go and have the time with him.

His coach arrived, and Tess was ready, along with her mother, who would be joining them as her chaperone. Her mother certainly enjoyed the opportunity to go and gossip with the other ladies who were there, and it would be a lovely chance to catch up, so Tess was far from surprised when her mother chose to go instead of sending along someone else as a chaperone.

“Lady Oakley, you look lovely,” Lord Corrington said, complimenting her just as he was expected to.

“Thank you, Your Grace. You are too kind,” Tess replied.

They put on the display in front of her mother as was anticipated, and it was something of a relief when they all climbed into the coach, and Tess understood that they would be continuing the display for a while longer. She hated to admit it, but she loved pretending that she would soon be Lord Corrington’s wife.

“It is a beautiful day, is it not?” he asked, making conversation with her mother.

“Oh, yes! Most definitely. I do love when the sun is out like this. I think that sometimes our English weather gets a bit dull,” her mother

said, making the subtle complaint without openly expressing the truth of how rainy it frequently was.

“Indeed, yes,” Lord Corrington said. “Well, it is good that we are choosing today to enjoy our walk instead of one which is cloudy.”

From there, in the midst of the doldrum conversation, silence ensued. Tess tried not to show her amusement that such proper talk was so boring as to drive her mad. It left them all simply sitting in an awkward quiet until, at last, the coach arrived at the park.

“Here we are,” Tess’s mother said, making herself the first to exit the coach when the coachman came to her assistance.

Tess smiled at Lord Corrington, who was evidently amused by her mother’s airy attempts at propriety, and he gestured for her to exit the coach next.

At last, they were out into the fresh air and, nearly at once, Tess’s mother waltzed away to speak with some of the other noblewomen nearby.

“Your mother does not speak of important things, it would seem,” Lord Corrington acknowledged as he took Tess’s arm in his own, and they began to walk.

“No, indeed. She much prefers to discuss whatever matter is the easiest. At times, I do fear that she leads such a humdrum life that she will one day wake up to find that nothing in the world is as she believes it is. And when that day comes, and she discovers that there

are things far more complex and discouraging than she ever knew, she will live in despair," Tess said.

"Well, that is a rather pessimistic way to look at it," Lord Corrington said.

"Yes, I know. You must forgive me for that. It is not as though I wish that for her, but I do worry that it is the life she will be relegated to. After all, there are few things in this world more discouraging than finding that England is not always sunny," she said.

Lord Corrington looked off in the distance, and it was evident that he had something on his mind. Tess was intrigued, wanting to know what was bothering him and if it was something that she had done or if he might need to speak with her about something. Still, she was too nervous to ask.

"And how is your aunt? You had mentioned her once when we spoke previously. She has returned?" Tess asked.

"Indeed, she has. I recently joined her family for dinner, and it was a very nice time," he said.

"That is wonderful. You must care for her very much," Tess observed.

"I do. She has given me quite a lot of joy in life. She was my father's sister, you know. I do believe that she is one of the reasons I have been fortunate to truly succeed in life. Without her constant encouragement, I would have been rather unhappy much of the time," Lord Corrington said, as though his thoughts were still drifting.

Tess observed him a moment longer, noting the way his eyes seemed heavy. Not with sleep or exhaustion, but with thought.

“And you? Your family? All is well?” he asked, as though just remembering it was the polite thing to do.

“Yes, they are very well. I know that my mother and father are both tremendously excited by the fact that we are engaged. And although you and I know the truth behind our engagement, I do believe that we have fooled them quite easily,” Tess said.

“I am sure of that. You have done well to play your part. I know that I did not do so well in my errors at the ball, but I appreciate that you forgave me and gave me an opportunity to make things right,” he said.

It still stung the way that he had behaved. But Tess was choosing to let go of the past and focus on the fact that she was with him in this wonderful moment. Although Tess still had to overcome the fact that it would be over soon, she was glad for the days they had together.

However, in that moment, as she took in how distracted he seemed to be, she was eager to push and find out what was going on in his mind.

“It was nothing,” she said at last. “I know that you must have found it difficult to try and pretend that we were a match when you wished to be with those other young women that evening. I cannot fault you for that.”

“Indeed, I believe there was every reason to fault me,” he said. “I was unjust in my treatment of you. Honestly, I think I was finding it rather difficult to accept that I was being seen as a man getting married.”

“You did not find it worthwhile to be seen restricted to only one woman?” she asked, feeling quite sure that it must be very difficult for a man like him to do so.

“I had not considered it in that way, but I understand how it must seem that way to most,” he said.

“I will not lie and pretend that the majority of people do not see you as a man who would happily parade around London with a new woman every hour. You already know they see you in that way,” she said.

“Well, I am appreciative of your honestly, Lady Oakley. Yes, I know that I am viewed that way. I had hoped, however, that you knew by now that I am not simply the sum of my affections,” he said.

“Indeed, that is one thing I have noted,” she replied.

“Well, I am relieved to hear that. I assure you that I truly do have more to me aside from that. I am not simply a man who seeks the attention of women and disregards them. It shames me that people have thought for so long that I disregard women without a thought. Well, perhaps they believe so because I have done just that,” he said.

“I am sure they know that there is more to you than that,” Tess said.

“They do not. I had an unfortunate incident with a young lady who used to be a paramour of mine. She expressed her indignation as to how I treated her. I cannot be upset about it. She was correct,” he noted.

A whirl of emotions welled up within Tess. She wished to comfort Lord Corrington for his grief. She also wished to scold him for having been so heartless. But ultimately, she was furious with herself for the fact that this only made her pine for him, hating that there was ever another woman in his life whom he cared for. She hated that she was so weak as to wish that she had been the only woman in his eyes.

Tess sighed and realised that Lord Corrington was looking at her curiously for doing so. It was terribly embarrassing to have been caught showing emotion like that. She simply reminded herself that she didn’t wish to marry anyway. Whatever care she had for Lord Corrington was likely temporary anyway. Tess had never been meant for marriage, she was too independent, and the fact that he made her feel less so was even further reason to push him away.

“Regardless of the fact that the young woman was hurt, I think it is important for any woman to know that if she is going to pursue a potential romance with a man who is known to disdain marriage, she ought to be prepared for him to refuse to marry her,” Tess said, speaking just as much to herself as to Lord Corrington.

“Is that so?” he asked, sounding less than pleased with himself.

“Indeed, it is,” she said.

He paused for a moment in his walk, and Tess stopped and waited for him. But before she could say anything, he looked at her with a strange tenderness in his eyes.

“And does that mean that you ought to be prepared for such a thing?”

The question hung in the air for a long moment, unanswered and painful.

Tess’s eyes flicked away, unable to hold Lord Corrington’s gaze any longer. But when she glanced ahead, she saw Lord Stanton walking as well, his eyes trained on her with a bitterness that she could not deny. Tess noted when Lord Corrington followed her gaze and saw him as well before sucking in a sharp breath of anxiety.

Instead of making a comment about it, Lord Corrington began to walk again. Tess went along with him, and they both avoided looking back at Lord Stanton. She knew that he was likely to be following them with his eyes, but she simply couldn’t bear noticing him once more. She expected that Lord Corrington felt much the same and that he was making every effort to avoid him likewise.

“I do hope that it will not be like this forever,” Tess said, under her breath.

“Then I suppose it is a good thing that our engagement is a farce,” Lord Corrington reminded her. “If it were true, we just might have to endure it. However, as you intend to end the engagement soon, he is likely to move on to being angry that you rejected him regardless of the reason.”

Although it stung to have the reminder that she was meant to end things, Tess was more curious about the tone which Lord Corrington used when he said it. There was something about it that felt accusatory, as though it was her choice that he regretted, that he was even somewhat offended by it.

She studied his face for a moment. Whatever that hesitation , and that distance was caused by, she could see nothing but a man full of pain and regret. Tess wondered if he was trying to express something, perhaps something to the effect that he didn't want her to end it as much as he had previously suggested.

That thought brought a surge of hope that Tess immediately regretted. She didn't want to think along those lines and give herself any reason to think that life could turn in that direction. She knew what they had agreed to, and it was foolish to think that he had changed his mind as she had.

"Well, so long as the both of us understand that I will be ending it according to our original agreement, I cannot give a thought to how Lord Stanton might interpret the incident. Now, might we move along from speaking about him? I cannot abide him," Tess said.

"Yes, I know that you cannot. We may discuss something different, of course," he said, the notes of frustration still underlying his tone. Tess wasn't sure what she was doing wrong.

"We may discuss the things which my mother prefers. Would you like to hear how lovely the weather is today?" Tess asked, teasing him in the hope that he might be amused.

He gave her a polite smile, but she couldn't help noticing when he looked back up at Lord Stanton again and winced.

"I fear that I am feeling unwell," Lord Corrington said.

Disappointment crept over Tess, and she wondered if he wanted to leave because of something she had done or if it was because of Lord Stanton. Regardless of who it was that had caused him to wish to depart, Tess was bitter that he was choosing to do so. She simply wanted more time with him. It was unfair that he should try to depart like this and that he would do it in such an unceremonious way.

"I am very sorry. Are you all right? Is there anything that you need? I may ask my mother to see about getting you some water if you would like," Tess offered, hoping that she would be able to stop him from leaving.

"Oh, no, thank you," he said. "I feel that it would be best if I return home. I do not wish to pass this along to you."

She eyed him for some time without responding, and Lord Corrington finally looked back up at Tess. The lie was clear in his face, but she decided it was not a good idea to tell him as much. Instead, she simply smiled away her disappointment and nodded.

"Very well. Yes, you must take the coach and return home," she said.

"I will hire another coach. You and your mother take the one we

brought here and then send him back to me. I should not like to make you find another, and I truly do not wish for either of you to become unwell by riding in it together," he said, restating his previous point.

Tess knew there was nothing she could say. He had made up his mind and clearly had no intention of going back or making a change of any sort. She was deeply bothered but understood that Lord Corrington was going to return home and would not give her a chance to convince him to do otherwise.

"Well, in that case, I wish you a wonderful afternoon, Lord Corrington. I am sorry that you are unwell," she said.

"And you must forgive me for departing so soon. Please pass along my apologies to your mother as well," he said, making a quick departure and leaving Tess standing there.

She knew that her mother would comment on how rude it was of him, but Tess didn't want to belabour the point.

She began walking towards where her mother stood with the other ladies when Lord Stanton sidled up next to her.

"Lady Oakley, how lovely to see you," he said.

"And you, Lord Stanton," she replied stiffly.

"It is such a shame, really," he said.

Tess knew she ought not to take the bait, but she simply could not help herself. She glanced at him again and gave in.

“What is, Lord Stanton?”

“Well, I must say that I have never seen a happy groom leave in such earnest,” he said. “There seems to be something that caused him to depart rather quickly. I certainly hope that the two of you are not having any disagreements so early on in your courtship. But I suppose it is not my business. I do, however, hope that you know how to appease him.”

Tess swallowed her anger and insecurity. She wanted to retort in anger and express that Lord Stanton was better off keeping his opinions to himself, but she found that she was at a loss for what to say. When she turnerend to him to respond, he was gone, and she was alone.

Chapter 26

“You are not yourself,” James said as Milton stared into the fire of his study.

He had not seen Lady Oakley in two days, and his heart was beginning to ache from the separation. This was never supposed to happen. He was never meant to be the sort of many who would pine and be weakened by affection. Whatever had gotten into him, Milton was desperate to get it back out again.

“You need not worry. I am perfectly fine. Perhaps I have had too much to drink,” Milton said, lifting his empty glass for James to see.

“I do not think that is it. Come, you must tell me. I am a married man now, and that makes me wise, does it not?” James asked.

“If being married makes one wise, England would be in a very different state than she is. Most of our leaders are married, and yet, well, you have seen how they behave often enough,” Milton said , dryly.

“Ho ho! Well, you are truly in a disgruntled condition. I thought as much, but now I can see it for certain. You must be upset if you are making an effort to attack the very fibre of our nation by accusing our leaders the men of this nation of doing a poor job in spite of being married. Now, tell me, Milton, what is it that has you so bothered?” James asked.

“It is nothing. We need not speak of it. Now, shall we move on to other things? Tell me about lifke as a married man. How is your wife? Are you doing well? Enjoying the blessings of marriage?” He asked, making every effort to move on.

James glared at him for a long moment and then shrugged.

“Yes, indeed. I am very happy. I am thrilled to be married to Rue, as you always knew that I would be. She is a most wonderful woman, and I cannot imagine my life without her. You know, sSometimes I wonder how I am so fortunate as finding her in the first place. We met at a ball one evening, and I simply knew that she was the woman I would spend my life with,” James said.

“I recall. I was there, you know,” Milton said.

“Yes, of course, you were. I had forgotten. And you told me that she was truly a beauty and that you would pursue her if I failed to,” James said with a laugh.

“Good heavens, I feel terrible now at having said such a thing. You must forgive me for it,” Milton said.

“It is forgiven. Nothing in this world could stop me from loving her the way that I do, and nothing will ever lead me to bitterness against anyone who tried to stand in our way. I love my wife like none other has ever loved. At least, that is how it feels most of the time. Perhaps it is silly as I expect every man thinks as much. I am sure that even you feel this way about Lady Oakley,” James said.

“Very much, very much,” Milton said, trying to keep on with the charade.

It had been painful to see her at Hyde Park when he knew that the letter he had received was serious. And then, when he saw Lord Stanton, Milton understood that he was getting into trouble. The last thing he wanted was to bow to that madman, but he also could not pretend that there were no serious consequences at play. It seemed as though Lord Stanton might stop at nothing.

Milton wondered if he ought to go and confront Lord Stanton. The only problem was that the letter had been anonymous. If Lord Stanton claimed it had not been sent by him, Milton had no evidence to the contrary. And if it got out that he had made such an accusation against Lord Stanton, others might consider Milton petty or desperate to be rid of the competition for Lady Oakley. Regardless, it would not look good for him, and he wished to avoid that at all costs.

“Good heavens, I am tired of this,” James said, setting down his drink and shaking his head.

Milton looked at him, wide-eyed and wondering what had happened.

“Are you truly not going to tell me the honest truth of what is the matter with you? I cannot bear it, Milton. I am weary of your constant foul mood and the fact that you will not tell me what has happened. Why are you brooding all the time? Is there nothing you wish to get out? I would rather hear what is on your heart than watch you like this,” James said.

Milton froze. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He couldn’t confess to James. Not yet. It was still too soon. James would

surely tell Rue, and then Rue would confront Lady Oakley, and the whole thing would be a mess. Everyone would find out. All the efforts Milton had made to assist Lady Oakley would fall apart.

For now, he had to remain silent and allow James to be angry with him. He would confess eventually.

“I wish that I could tell you, James, but it is not the time yet. Please, just be patient with me for a little while longer. I assure you that, as soon as I am able, I will tell you,” Milton said.

James narrowed his eyes, and he appeared to seethe, but eventually, he relented.

“If you insist, I shall leave you with your privacy. But do not expect me to bear it for long, Milton. You are infuriating at this time, and I cannot bear to listen to any more of your nonsense. Now, if you will excuse me, I should like to return home to be with my wife. I bid you adieu,” James said, standing and leaving his glass on the desk.

“James…” Milton called.

James turned and looked at him once, waiting for Milton to say what he needed to say.

“I am truly sorry,” was all he was able to respond.

“Perhaps you are, but I wish for my friend to be more than sorry. I

wish for him to be honest," James said. "Good evening."

With that, James departed, leaving Milton to continue staring into the fire with the fury of his thoughts. All he wanted was a bit of peace and a relief from all that had been faint on around him. It was entirely unfair to be so caught up in all of this, a. And yet, he knew that he was perfectly responsible for it. He had made a choice to use Lady Oakley. He had never known that using her would lead to loving her.

HAnd he had convinced himself all along that it was purely out of selflessness for her. Milton had wanted to think that he was doing something chivalrous when, truthfully, he was trying to avoid marriage. But now that it was all coming to this, he just wanted her to know how deeply he cared for her and how much he longed to actually spend his life with her.

One day, he trusted, he would manage to get over these feelings, and he would be able to move on. Until that day, however, he would simply need to convince himself that there was nothing to these thoughts, and he ought to just be the man that he always was, the man who didn't need a woman to get in his way.

There was a knock at the door of the study, and Milton was jolted from his pining. He looked up at the wooden door and sighed.

"Come in," he called.

The door opened, and a footman came in with a tray.

"A letter for you, Your Grace," he said.

Milton took the paper from the trey and gave the footman a nod that he could depart. Once he was gone, Milton opened the letter. At once, he was filled with dread upon seeing that the handwriting matched that of the previous letter.

Dear Lord Corrington,

You have not heeded my warning. I trust that you understand the extent of the consequences if you refuse to acknowledge the fact that I have given you a true and generous warning., I fear that I must further carry out my words.

You know that you have done a very grave thing in leading Lady Oakley to care for you. There are not many who know the travesty of your family, but for those who have heard, we are aware of the fact that you are putting Lady Oakley's life in jeopardy. You could be the death of her if you are not careful. As it is, you are only leading her down the path of pain and suffering. You are doing the same to your own heart as you know what will be the end of this.

Furthermore, because of the great importance of this, I wish to ensure that you know how serious I am. If you do not break off the engagement and cease to court Lady Oakley, I am perfectly comfortable sharing that the circumstances of your engagement are deeply suspicious. For a young woman who was already being courted by another man to drop such an honour in favour of a man with no honour, such as yourself, it might lead others to question her reputation.

And when they do, the idea shall be abundant.

You see, your reputation is well established. It would not be difficult to express that to others and to ask why a young woman might leave a courtship for a man who has already behaved so improperly with others. Clearly, she must have gotten herself into some sort of trouble—perhaps the sort of trouble that requires a quick marriage.

No one shall question it. Children are lost often enough that assumptions will be made regardless. This is your decision, Lord Corrington. It is up to you to decide what you are willing to make her suffer. If you care about her at all, you shall end this infatuation with Lady Oakley. Now.

You have been warned a second time. Do not expect a third.

Milton tried to steady his breathing. He knew that this meant exactly the worst of things. This man—most likely Lord Stanton, although Milton could not be sure after the mention of his family—was willing to suggest that he and Lady Oakley had behaved improperly, all for the sake of trying to ruin whatever chance at happiness the two of them might have.

It was a ridiculous notion to think that she would have done any such thing, and Milton was furious that this threat was being made against her. There was no basis for it, and it had to be purely the sake of jealousy, causing this author to write such a thing. Yes, it seemed to be Lord Stanton. Milton longed to go and confront him, b. But there were still so many reasons that would be difficult, and he understood that if he were to try and confront Lord Stanton, that would likely only make him more eager to fulfil the threats he had made.

Indeed, this was growing more complicated than ever. Milton feared that it was too late to undo what he was being threatened with. He feared that Lord Stanton would show his vengeance no matter what, even if Milton tried to fix matters.

IBut it was clear that there was no room for himI'm to actually continue in his courtship with Lady Oakley. If he cared about her at all—which he did very much—he would truly need to end the engagement sooner than he had planned. He would need to tell her that it could not continue, and he would need to find an excuse.

Milton feared the idea of telling Lady Oakley about the letters. There were many reasons it was not a good idea to do so. First of all, he worried that she would only lash out at Lord Stanton in an effort to make him pay for what he had done. He would not take too kindly to that and would be quite likely to get her back with fury.

TBut that was not the only thing Milton feared. He also worried that if she confronted him, Lord Stanton might tell her the truth behind why Milton had avoided marriage all these years.

It was a shameful thing, and he worried that she might shun him or think worse of him if she found out the truth. If she knew what happened to all the women in his family, she might be terrified of the brief association they had—she might even hate him for not telling her first.

But she might also laugh at him. After all, there had been those who deemed Milton's concerns a mere superstition. He couldn't refute the fact that his superstition had plenty of evidence behind it, and the idea of letting Lady Oakley figure all of this out for herself was painful to him. He worried that she might think ill of him either way, and the last thing he wanted was to express his thoughts to her and find that she did not take him seriously.

He needed to convince Lady Oakley to end the engagement sooner.

That was the only choice, and it was something he would need to urge her to do. Of course, in the end, he knew that he couldn't. There was no chance that he would find the strength to tell her to break the engagement ever—much less sooner than planned. She would have no further excuse for avoiding Lord Stanton. And yet, if she did not end things, Lady Oakley might be ruined forever.

Chapter 27

Tess paced the room, wondering what was going on. She couldn't understand the silence or what she might have done wrong to cause it.

Frustrated by the fact that nothing seemed to be going right, she believed that the only way she could have what she truly wanted was to fight for it by urging Lord Corrington to have a change of heart. She would be everything a young woman must be.

Except that was foolish. She could not change herself—nor did she want to. It wasn't right for a woman to try and change herself for the sake of a man, and yet, so often, they did so. She did not wish to be one of those women.

Instead of succumbing to that temptation, Tess had decided she would allow herself just a few minutes each day to pine and brood before picking herself up, accepting the reality, and moving on. If Lord Corrington was able to do so, she could certainly do so. There was no reason to give herself less credit or believe that she was somehow incapable of having that strength.

When Tess paced, she took that time. She considered the fact that it had been three days since she had heard from Lord Corrington. He had previously told her that he would come to pay a call on this day. It was something they had arranged. And yet, she had heard nothing now. Nothing since that day at Hyde Park. He had sent an apology that evening, promising to come for a visit, but now, the day was nearing noon, and she had heard nothing.

It was utterly ridiculous that she had believed he would come or that

he would even have a reason to want to. Tess hated that she had allowed herself to have such hopes and to think that he would be as eager as she was.

Just then, her mother burst into the room, exasperated.

“Good heavens, where is that man? Has something happened between the two of you? He was meant to come here today. Where is he?” her mother asked.

“I do not know, Mother,” Tess replied.

“But he said that he would come today, did he not? I cannot understand why he would make such a promise and then not come. It is deeply frustrating. I am furious that he should think our time of so little value as to not bother with informing us that he could not come,” her mother said.

“Perhaps he sent around a note, but something obstructed it from coming,” Tess said, hoping that it was true even though she doubted that it was.

“That is nonsense, and you know it. Or, if it is true, he had best fire the servant and find a new one. Any servant who cannot take a note to someone is in need of a good consequence,” her mother said.

“Please, Mother, you ought not talk like that,” Tess said, wishing that her mother would be kinder and gentler to household staff. Although she was no sympathizer of the likes of Lord Stanton and his father, her mother had never taken a care in regards to those of a lower station.

“Enough, Tess. You know what I mean by it,” her mother said.

Tess sighed and paused by the window, staring out longingly, wishing that she would see a coach coming up to the house and watch as Lord Corrington climbed out of it. But it seemed that it would not happen. It seemed as though he would not come to her. It was a deeply painful realisation, but there it was. She could do nothing but accept it.

“Are you certain that nothing has happened between the two of you?” her mother asked again.

Tess shook her head, although she was certainly thinking through their previous and , recent interactions. She had begun to worry that something else had taken place. What if Lord Corrington had been involved in an accident of some sort? What if something had happened to him?

She could not keep it at bay when the tears sprang to her eyes, threatening to drip over her lashes. The idea of him being hurt was agonisingly painful, and Tess wondered what might have happened to him to cause this silence. If he had, indeed, been injured, she would grieve for the rest of her days. She would feel the pain of loss for the man to whom she had been engaged.

Regardless of the fact that their engagement was a lie, Tess felt it deeply. She felt the surge of excitement when she thought about being engaged to him and when people would ask her about the engagement. No matter that he hardly acknowledged it and that it was all a farce. She felt it anyway. She felt it deep within her chest, and her heart burst with the joy of it.

But if Lord Corrington had been injured, there would be a reason behind all of this, and she could let go.

However, something within Tess knew that was not the case. Surely he had not been injured. It was down to the fact that he likely didn't see a need to continue in the charade. After all, the courtship with Lord Stanton was ended, and her mother and father had declared their happiness that she had moved on with another man. Why should that man actually continue in the appearance that they had arranged?

Suddenly, everything made sense to Tess. She understood precisely how unrealistic she had been. Of course, Lord Corrington would wish to move on by now instead of pretending that they were still planning for the future. He had every reason to enjoy his own life as a bachelor and as a man with many things he wished to accomplish outside of marriage. It was suffocating of Tess to put him in the sort of noose that would require him to continue in the appearance of wanting this.

No, she had to let go. It was the only fair thing. The only right thing. She needed him to know that she would move on just as quickly and as well as he had. That was the only hope she had.

Certainly, Tess feared that ending this engagement and the charade so soon would cause her mother and father to send her running back into the arms of Lord Stanton, but Tess was determined she would do no such thing. This time, she would convince them in her own right that it was not possible and it would not be done. She needed them to know and respect her decision to never marry that man or go anywhere near him, no matter what.

Even if he tried to get her attention or convince her that she ought to be with him, Tess would refuse him. She would never give him the

satisfaction of believing that she cared for him. In truth, she detested him, and that was all he needed to know.

“Tess, dear, I need to know if you are expecting this man to come or not,” her mother said.

“Mother, how can I know? I am not Lord Corrington. I do not know what is in his mind,” Tess said.

“Yes, well, you had better figure it out. You are, after all, engaged to the man. You are responsible for knowing if he is or is not going to show up when he promises to do so. I would like for you to find out if he still has an interest in you at all,” her mother said.

Frustrated, Tess glared.

“Why would you ask such a thing, Mother? Why do you doubt his motives? You know nothing of what he wants or what he will do. Just because he has failed to communicate his intention for today means nothing,” she said, defending him to her mother because she could no longer defend him to herself.

“Goodness, Tess, you must be realistic. If he has not said anything today, well, that is not a good sign. A man has only one day. This day. If he is not quick, he loses it,” her mother said.

“What does that have to do with anything, Mother?”

“It has everything to do with this, Tess. You care for Lord Corrington, and he has proposed to you. Just because you are engaged does not mean that he cannot change his mind. And a man who truly cares for the woman he has pursued would not take the risk of infuriating her or losing her. A young lady such as yourself has already had many suitors. He knows this,” her mother said.

Tess understood, then, exactly what her mother was trying to say. After all, Tess had made a great effort to escape the other courtship in favour of this one. In her mother’s eyes, if Lord Corrington really cared about Tess, he wouldn’t risk yet another man coming along and trying to steal her out froorm under him.

She wasn’t sure how to explain to her mother that this would never happen, and Lord Corrington was most certainly not worried about it. But that was her mother’s point, of course. He wasn’t worried. He didn’t seem to mind if someone else came along in pursuit of Tess.

She would simply have to accept that he was no longer interested.

“I think you ought to have chosen Lord Stanton,” her mother sighed.

“Mother!” Tess exclaimed.

“Well? Look at Lord Corrington. He has not come. Lord Stanton always came. He cared for you a great deal and pursued you relentlessly. Lord Corrington has not shown you that same level of respect. I can only assume that it is because he has chosen to move on or forget about you. Either way, you need to have a marriage secured. If Lord Stanton is the one you must choose, then so be it,” her mother said.

“I will not marry Lord Stanton, Mother,” Tess insisted.

“But why? He is such a good man,” her mother said.

“No, he is not. Have you heard nothing I have said about him? He is not a good man, Mother. He is a terrible man. He wants nothing of my own happiness. He is selfish and wants only for his own good. He cares not for the lives of others. And, as you know, I am very serious in my dislike of all that his father stands for,” Tess said, reminding her mother of the many reasons she could not happily marry Lord Stanton, no matter what sort of convenience arose from it.

“You are far too stubborn. A man can change, Tess. You need to give him the chance to show you that. I am sure that you will come to find he is a much better man than you give him credit for,” her mother said.

“He is exactly the man I have described, Mother. He does not wish to change, and I have no intention of being the one to try changing him. It is not worth my time or effort. I have found the man I wish to be with,” she said.

“Well, you had best contact him as soon as you can and find out if he feels the same. I would suggest that you write to him and ask after his health. If he forgot to come today—which would be a rather dreadful thing—it might urge him to remember for the next time,” her mother said.

Tess took a deep breath and nodded. She knew that her mother was right, although it pained her to admit. No matter what, none of this

was going to be easy. Still, Tess trusted that she would be able to communicate with Lord Corrington to find out what exactly had happened, and she could try to make things right with him at once.

She stormed from the room, aware that she was being petulant, and made her way up to her bedroom. Tess went at once to her desk and pulled out a pen and ink, as well as a sheet of paper.

She understood that she would need to maintain a civil tone, although she found it regrettable to do so. But for Lord Corrington, who had come to mean the world to her, she wanted him to think well of her even in the midst of all of this. Bearing that in mind, Tess began to write with as much nicety as she could muster.

Lord Corrington,

I suppose I ought to address this with something akin to 'my dear' or 'my love', but I trust that you will not be angry with me for not doing so.

I wish to ask if you still intend to carry on our arrangement or if you believe that you have accomplished your task?. My mother is eager to ensure that our engagement still stands and is now beginning to urge me to return to the attentions of Lord Stanton. I fear that she will no longer trust you if we do not keep up these appearances. However, if you do not wish to make this engagement appear believable, I understand, and we must go our separate ways. But I would appreciate the courtesy of being told before I embarrass myself any further.

I would be ever so thankful if you would inform me as to your decision, that I might make a new plan for myself if you are no longer going to be a part of this one.

Thank you for your time and all the efforts in the past,

Lady Tess Oakley

She could not deny that she had worded the letter rather carefully to ensure something of a guilt trip, but Tess believed that she had the letter written as well as it was going to be, and she folded it up and prepared it to go to the post. Without another thought, she took it down the stairs and to the footman, handing it to him with a placid smile.

“Would you be so kind as to deliver this right away?” she asked, hopeful that he might take it before her mother asked to see it or otherwise did something to make it difficult for Tess to hide the truth.

“Yes, my Llady. I shall deliver it at once,” he said.

“Thank you,” she replied, watching him bow and then turn from her. He made his way out the door, and Tess believed that she might soon know where her future stood. She would either have the happiness that she had begun to crave, or she would lose any hope of anything other than a life beholden to Lord Stanton. In truth, even if she fought it, even if she managed to get out of marrying him, Tess would always know that he had won.

He would win, so long as Tess managed to lose. And without Lord Corrington in her life, the loss was imminent.

Chapter 28

Milton read the letter again, his heart breaking. He hated knowing that Lady Oakley was in so much pain. He saw it in her words, the stoic attempts to sound firm and sure of herself. He was beginning to suspect that something had changed for her—just as it had changed for him. Although it was difficult to allow himself to have hope, Milton couldn't help it. He longed to think that Lady Oakley might love him as well, and he was coming to find that there was actually a good amount of reason to think that might be the situation.

She had been so kind to him, and she had changed just as he felt himself changing. Was it possible? Was he wrong to have hope? But how could he stop himself from having hope?

Milton saw the hurt and the anger in the letter, and he tried to figure out how he might respond to her. What could he say?

He wanted to tell her that he was still devoted to the ruse, to give her some sort of excuse as to why he had not come that day. But the truth was that he still greatly feared the letter he had received. He worried that the threats would soon be carried out if he was not careful.

He was unable to tell her outright about the letters he had been receiving and how they threatened to undo the both of them. He could not bear to tell her how much it grieved him to have to step away from her and let go of the love he had come to feel for her.

And, if he was correct in his suspicions that Lady Oakley had come to feel the same way, Milton grgrieved the idea that he might need to confess that his heart was betrayedhad betrayed him. and that hHe

had allowed himself to have feelings that he vowed never to have—for the sake of her own protection.

Wondering if Lady Oakley would even be willing to hear him in this regard, Milton realised that he was not likely to be acknowledged for the reasons that he held. He understood that she would scoff in his face for thinking that there was any weight to be held carried by the worries and concerns that he had. And yYet, to let her suffer was even worse, and he would never forgive himself if she met such a fate.

No, for the moment, he would choose to remain silent because it was the only choice he had. If he was not silent, he would have to be honest, and honesty was a painful thing indeed.

At last, Milton was too far at a loss to continue his attempts to work through this alone. He understood that he couldn't do it. He needed help from someone with more wisdom and understanding than he had.

With that in mind, Milton sent a card around for James, asking him to come at his earliest convenience to discuss the matter that had been bothering him. Milton didn't wish to go there, fearing that Rue might overhear him and that the entire thing might be undone. But if he truly stressed the importance of secrecy with James, perhaps he might be able to get it all out, every last bit of his worries. After all, James was the best man he had ever known.

By the time James arrived at the house, Milton's turmoil had reached its tipping point. He looked up as James walked in the room, and Milton immediately hung his face in his hands, wondering how he could possibly get through everything he needed to say and how James would feel upon learning the truth.

But James was a sensitive soul, and he drew up a chair near Milton and sat with patience. He patted Milton on the back in a friendly manner, just to let him know that he was there, and he understood that Milton was going through pain.

“Forgive me. I know that I am a fool, and I should not show so much emotion,” Milton said.

“You are not a fool. It is the men who pretend to have no emotion who are the fools. You are simply acknowledging that you feel. Whatever you feel, no matter the good or the bad, it is best that you simply share it and get it out,” James said.

Milton looked up at last and sighed.

“I suppose you are right,” he said.

“May I venture to guess that this emotion is in regards to your engagement and the wife you are soon to have?” James asked.

“Yes, it is about her,” Milton admitted.

“And is it because you fear the fact that you have committed to a marriage when you have so long been a man who refused to ever do so? I can only imagine that you are upset because you realise you have gotten yourself into the situation of being engaged to a woman,” James said.

“No, it is not that,” Milton said.

“No? So you are not afraid of the feelings you have for her? You are not worried for the fact that you are going to be married?” James asked.

Milton realised that James had every reason to believe that this was the problem behind his emotions. And yet, knowing that James thought this only bothered Milton further. He had grown to hate his reputation. He despised it and the fact that everyone believed he was simply a man trying to avoid a match at all cost.

If they knew what was truly in his heart and how his longings had changed, they would not question him like this. They would recognise that he had every reason to feel the way he did, that he had every reason to be worried when his heart had shifted.

But James had not known the truth of the matter. He had heard the lie Milton had told, claiming love for the sake of marriage before Milton truly knew what love meant and how deeply his own love ran. But nowNow, though, it was time. Now, James needed to know the truth.

“I have told a most egregious lie, James. And before I confess the truth to you, I need a promise from you,” Milton said.

James flinched, clearly not prepared for this, but he gave a slow, steady nod.

“When I say that you must not tell anyone, I mean even your own

wife. There is no one we care for who will not be hurt by this lie. Because of that, I trust that you can keep your word? That you can remain silent?" he asked.

James took a deep breath.

"No one will be hurt?" he asked.

"Only Lord Stanton…and myself," Milton admitted.

James chewed the inside of his cheek for a moment, evidently thinking this through.

"While I cannot say that I approve of something which hurts Lord Stanton, I cannot either pretend that I am bothered by it. As for you, however, I do not wish to see you hurt. You must be honest with me and tell me because I would like to stop you from doing anything which may cause you pain if I am able," James said.

"I fear that nothing can stop this. It is already in motion. But I will ache for the sake of the woman who means everything to me," Milton said.

James looked at him intently once more, clearly intrigued by this. Milton knew he had to be open and come out with the truth.

"James, you are, of course, aware of the fact that I have become engaged to Lady Oakley. However, what you do not—what no one, as

a matter of fact—knows is that it is all a farce. It is a ruse," he said.

James winced, and his gaze turned to a glare.

"You have played a ruse against her? You said that no one was hurt," he said.

"No, not against her," Milton said quickly. "She and I came together to arrange this. We discussed the matter at length. In fact, it was her idea. The plan was to pretend that we were courting so that she might be able to escape her courtship with Lord Stanton."

"What?" James asked in astonishment.

"She came to me, having heard that I had vowed never to marry. She asked if I would pretend alongside her. We made a plan to behave as though we were to be married. Then, after a few months, or sooner if Lord Stanton moved on quickly, she would end the engagement. She would play heartbroken so that no one would force her to marry straight away or to return to Lord Stanton. And I would be forever destroyed by reputation in terms of romance. I would be left alone by the mothers and fathers who wish for me to marry their daughters," he explained.

James stared at him, slack-jawed in shock.

"I confess that I never imagined this," he said.

“Precisely. That is why it worked so well. No one expected that we might take this so far. No one believed that our independence was so important to us that we would deliberately fool everyone in our lives by pretending to marry,” Milton said.

“And it worked? You have certainly fooled myself and my wife—as well as Lady Oakley’s mother and father,” James said.

“Precisely. We have fooled them all. We led them to believe that we were going to be married and that we wished to be together,” he said.

“But why are you so overwhelmed by it now? What has you so grieved?” James asked , intuitively.

“It is the most obvious thing, really. It is because I have fallen in love with her. Truly. What started as a charade has become something deeply important to me,” Milton said.

“Oh, dear,” James replied.

“Indeed. Foolish, is it not? I wish that I had not allowed myself to become so distracted by her, to be caught up in tt he fact that I love her. All of this was meant to be nothing more than a way of assisting her in avoiding a marriage she did not wish for. Indeed, she does not wish to marry at all. And, instead of securing her freedom, it has led me down a path of forgoing the commitment that I made to never allow my heart to be given over to a woman,” he said.

“But that is not foolish at all, Milton,” James said with urgency. “You must allow your heart to draw closer to her. You love her, and there is

nothing wrong with that. How may I urge you to make the right choice? You cannot let go of the feelings you have for this woman. Surely, you must allow your heart to be moved."

Although James was insistent, Milton could not allow himself to have this hope. He longed for more than just the simple yearning that he had been trying to keep at bay. He wanted freedom. Freedom from the love he held for Lady Oakley or the freedom to pursue her without pretence.

"I do not know what to do, James. She asked me for my help so that she would never be obligated to marry. I have failed her by falling in love with her. And, although there is a part of me which senses that she may care for me as well, I find it impossible to allow myself the gift of such a belief," Milton said.

"She cares for you? Then what is the problem?" James asked with a laugh of disbelief. Milton understood how foolish he sounded, touting his despair when there was every chance that Lady Oakley really did love him in return.

"I do not know it for certain. I am telling you only what I have hope for. She has been so kind to me and has shown me such grace. I cannot help but wish that she might have had a change of heart as well. I do not know if it is possible to believe, but I do wish for it. My love for her has grown so deep that it is nearly impossible to believe anything different," Milton confessed.

James shook his head, clearly somewhat frustrated.

"I fear that I do not understand you, Milton. You have everything you truly want. Here it is, before you. Why do you not simply tell her of

your love?" James asked.

"Because of Lord Stanton," he said.

James paused, realising that there could be something more. Milton saw in his friend's eyes that this was all James needed to hear to understand that there really was more to it.

"He is doing everything within his power to destroy me," Milton said. "I know that it sounds like a dramatic thing to say, but you have not seen him. And you have not seen this."

Milton got up and pulled out the two letters from the drawer of his desk. He brought them over to James and let his friend read. Once he had finished reading, James looked up at him in shock.

"Good heavens. This is a madman! But what is this nonsense about you being the death of her? I do not understand," James said.

Milton looked away, not knowing if he was ready to discuss that matter just yet.

"That is a very long story," he said. "But I will not get into it at the moment. As for the rest, what are your thoughts? I suspect it is Lord Stanton, of course, but what do you think? And what must I do?"

"Milton, there is no doubt in my mind that this is the work of Lord Stanton. He is the only man ridiculous enough to do something like

this. But I believe the answer to your second question is perfectly obvious, and I wish that you would see it as clearly as I do," James said.

"Oh? And what is that?" he asked.

"It is clear that you have no choice but to be brave. You must stand firm. You love this woman, and you cannot let Lord Stanton get in the way of it. You must confront him about these letters and tell him that he is a terrible man for trying to get in the way of your feelings. Then, you must go to Lady Oakley and confess your love for her. Not because I am telling you to do so, but because you can be brave. You can stand firm against this," James insisted.

Milton was frightened by the threats against Lady Oakley. He didn't wish to see anything come to harm her. And yet, he did not think he could resist the urging he had received from James. It was true.

He had but one choice.

Chapter 29

Tess had still heard nothing from Lord Corrington since sending her letter. She wondered what he might be thinking or doing. She wondered what he had thought when it arrived at his home the previous day.

Would he come to pay a call on her? Would he at least write to her and explain himself? She was losing hope that she would ever get answers from him. It was infuriating.

Nevertheless, Tess did not wish to give up. She still had to be strong in her belief that something would come of this, that there would be some sort of goodness ahead for herself and for Lord Corrington. She had to trust that they would find their happiness—so long as it was something that he wanted as well. Unfortunately, she was not certain that he did. Thus far, he had shown signs that he might care for her, but he had made no promises. He had not given her any sort of guarantee. That was the part that brought her the most grief.

But when she heard a coach coming up the road, Tess's heart leapt. Her father would not be returning home just yet, and it could not have been him. Her mother had recently returned from visiting a friend for tea and had drawn a bath.

Indeed, it had to be Lord Corrington. At last, he had come to her.

Tess rushed to the window and stared outside. The coach came up the path and stopped just outside of the estate. As the coachman opened the door, her heart raced until the moment came when he stepped out.

Lord Stanton.

Hope was replaced with fury. Joy was replaced with rage. Tess had not expected this at all. She had not anticipated that Lord Stanton would be so bold as to come to see her again or that he would show his face before her after all that had happened with Lord Corrington and how Lord Stanton had tried to make Tess feel as though she had done something wrong to send Lord Corrington away.

A part of her wished to rush outside and send him off, to tell him that he was unwelcome and must leave her alone.

But Tess knew that she could not do that. Her mother would be deeply ashamed, and her father would certainly punish her by making her marry him right away. Indeed, she would have to be civil, even if she did find it exhausting and painful to do so. She would make every effort to be reasonable.

Lord Stanton was shown into the drawing room where Tess now sat, a book in her hands to show that he was interrupting her. The last thing she wished was for him to know that she had only just been pining for Lord Corrington.

“Ah, Lady Oakley,” he greeted.

Tess stood and gave a curtsey but did not speak right away.

“May I sit?” Lord Stanton asked, looking offended that she had not offered for him to do so.

“As you please,” she said, statically.

He did so, and Tess sat across from him in her seat. They were quiet for a moment as a maid rushed into the room with tea. Once she had poured it, she swiftly departed, leaving the door open behind her.

“May I ask why you have come?” Tess asked.

“Ah, yes, indeed. You are a woman who prefers that I get straight to the point, are you not?” he asked with an awkward laugh.

“I do not enjoy sitting around, wondering about the reason for a visit as inauspicious as this one,” she replied firmly.

“Inauspicious, you say? Oh, dear. I did not know that it was that deeply regrettable. Well now, it would appear as though I have made a most egregious mistake. Nevertheless, Lady Oakley, I do wish to speak with you on the matter of your engagement,” he said.

“My engagement is of no concern to you, Lord Stanton,” Tess replied.

“Ah, yes, you say this, but I must insist otherwise,” he said.

“No, you must not. This is my own future, not yours. You have no say in the choices which I make. You have no say in who I marry. All you know is that I have not chosen you. I am sorry if this bothers you, Lord Stanton, but you must regard it as it is. There is nothing which will change my mind,” Tess said.

“I find that this is what deeply grieves me. Nevertheless, I do understand. I know that you have no desire to marry me, and I have not come simply to ask for you to change your mind on this matter. Rather, I should like to discuss with you as to the reasons for my concern in your current engagement,” he said.

“And I shall remind you—yet again—that you have no say in that matter. Now, Lord Stanton, I urge you to please move on from this. You and I have no further business,” Tess said.

“I disagree,” he insisted.

“Your disagreement is unimportant to me. I ask that if you are intending to stay here for tea, you speak of something else. Perhaps you have found someone new to court? I should like to hear about that,” Tess said. “Or if you would prefer to discuss the atrocities of slavery and the importance of fighting for abolition, I would also be willing to spend the time in conversation.”

She could see the indignation in Lord Stanton’s expression, but it was clear that he was not willing to go into any of these things. It was just as Tess had hoped. He was too much of a coward to speak with her on such important thingsmatters. Instead, she would simply let him give himself the freedom to make the mistake of continuing to try and urge her. She would watch as he humiliated himself, failing to convince her to listen.

“I came, Lady Oakley,” he insisted, “I came because I would like to urge you to reconsider your choice. Not out of any selfishness. But because I have heard it said that Lord Corrington has not fulfilled his duties in courtship or in betrothal. He has failed you at every turn. He has not been a strong, husbandly gentleman.”

“What is it for you to say?” Tess asked in fury, standing and demanding to know what was wrong with Lord Stanton that he might come to her and say such things.

Who was he to insist that there was something wrong with the man she was engaged to? Who was he to come and tell her that she ought to reconsider? There was nothing about him that she deemed respectable, and it was unbelievable that he would be so insistent as to say that she needed to prove anything about Lord Corrington for his sake.

Lord Stanton had gone far beyond the call of his place. He had insisted on something which was utterly ridiculous and nonsensical. Tess could hardly believe that he would make such assumptions and try to throw his weight around, behaving as though he had any reason to question the motivations of Lord Corrington. Tess knew what was behind their engagement, but she was the only one. For Lord Stanton to say something, this egregious was a nightmare.

“Lady Oakley, I did not mean to make you hot-tempered. I was simply stating what I have heard. I worry for you. I understand that you do not care for me, but that does not change how deeply I care for you,” he said in a pathetic attempt to get her to listen to him.

The manipulation rolled off Lord Stanton like a bad cologne. Tess could hardly believe that he was trying to make such suggestions or get further into her head in this manipulative manner.

“Lord Stanton, I do not know what led you to believe that you were welcome to come and visit me, but I suggest that you leave at once,” she said with a hiss.

“I beg your pardon?” he asked, clearly offended.

“You heard exactly what I have said. I cannot abide your presence here any longer. You have been sorely inappropriate. You have made a statement which is unbearable for me to listen to. You have spoken against the man that I am to marry, and you have had no reason to do so. I must insist that you depart from here and never return. Do you hear me?” she asked, still full of fury and rage.

“I cannot believe that you would treat me thusly. How dare you?” Lord Stanton asked.

“I dare because you have come into my home and made these accusations against the man I am soon to call husband,” she said, rounding on him. “You believe that I am simply going to sit by while you continue trying to slander him and urge me to think ill of him? It shall not happen, Lord Stanton. Of that, I assure you. I assure you that you are no friend of mine, and you do not belong in this home.”

“You do not know what it is that you are saying!” he shouted, whirling at Tess in a quick motion.

His fury was getting the best of him, but Tess did not mind. In her eyes, it only proved what she had long known about him. Lord Stanton was a man with an ugly heart. He always had been.

But she stood firm, not moving. Her arms were crossed, and she showed no fear of his temper.

At last, with a roar of anger, Lord Stanton burst from the room, unwilling to remain a moment longer. It was a moment of victory to Tess, knowing that she had been able to keep him at bay.

Once he was gone, she recognised that her heart was racing, threatening to burst at any moment. Tess took a deep breath, reassuring herself that everything was all right. That she would be just fine. After all, Lord Stanton was now gone, and she could truly be at peace with his departure.

However, when she turned to go back to her chair, Tess saw a paper on the floor. She looked at it closely and realised that it must have fallen from Lord Stanton's pocket, possibly when he had rounded in fury against her. Whenever it had fallen, she was curious to know what the letter held.

Tess picked it up and unfolded it. It seemed to be a draft of some sort. As though Lord Stanton had written the letter but changed his mind on a number of things he wished to say.

Lord Corrington,

This is the third time I have written to you. I told you in my previous letter that I would not write again, but I wish to give you a last final warning. While I am glad grateful that you appear to have heeded my warnings, I should like to be certain that you do not change yo frivolously change your

mind. I would like to ensure that you never again entertain the idea that you could ever pursue Lady Oakly Oakley.

Recall the threat of my words. If you should continue to pursue her in this courthi betrothal, I shall ruin her and you. I shall see to it that your secret will be made known throughout all of England and that there will be no corner which does not associate your name with the deaths of the women in your family.

Further, as I stated before previously, if you continued in this, I shall suggest into the very suggestible minds of the English public that Lady Oakley chose to marry you only because of the inconvenience within her womb. It will be easily explained away if she does not then deliver a child.

Do not forget these warnings.

With the words before her eyes, Tess began to wonder what more had gone on that she had been unaware of. Was all of this happening all along? Had Lord Stanton been sending these letters to Lord Corrington in order to threaten him all along?

It was an appalling shame, b. But Tess struggled to be surprised. After all, this was precisely the sort of behaviour that Lord Stanton had demonstrated for as long as she had known him. He was just the sort of man to do something like this, and Tess believed with every fibre of her being that he would happily try to ruin her if he thought that it would mean she might come back to him.

This letter was a clear and evident sign that Lord Stanton was working hard to ruin Tess and Lord Corrington both. He had decided that the only way to get what he wanted was to try and force their hands. He believed that he could have no victory without pushing them into

some kind of misery.

But Tess would not be beaten down. She was determined. She would not allow Lord Corrington to suffer at the hands of this madman.

The question now was how to handle it.

Tess had a very strong suspicion that Lord Corrington had told his dear friend about all of this. And, if that was so, it was likely that Rue was also aware. Or, if she wasn't, she soon would be. And tThat meant that Tess might as well tell her the rest of the story.

Even if Lord Corrington did not wish for a future with her, Tess wanted him to know that she would never allow for Lord Stanton's behaviour to be accepted. Lord Corrington could not be subject to these things, and she would make every effort to avoid it for his sake. But she would still share the truth with Rue, admitting that Tess cared for him and that she loved him despite the fact that their entire engagement had been a lie.

And, if Rue responded in the way Tess expected, there would be nothing to worry about. She would be understood. Rue would care for her and ensure that all was well. She might even make an effort to help Tess through the love and affection that she now felt.

She quickly rushed to inform her mother that she would be going to see Rue. After all, it was perfectly appropriate for her to visit her married friend, whereas it would be less appropriate for her to go and pay a visit to the man to whom she was engaged.

“Yes, call for Louisa. She will be a good chaperone for you,” her mother insisted.

“As you wish, Mother,” Tess replied. She then went and found the maid who had often acted in a chaperone capacity for her. With that, they made their way to the coach, climbed in, and set out for the home of Rue and her husband. Tess simply hoped that she would find the answers she was seeking.

If not, she feared that she would be fighting for the rest of her life.

Chapter 30

Milton took a final swig of his brandy and laid the cards on the table. He had never been a very good player, but he cared not about winning so much as trying to take his mind off everything. Sitting at the club was a way to do that.

He intended to go and speak with Lady Oakley the following day, once he'd had time to finish crafting his perfect apology and giving her an honest explanation. However, his mind needed a rest. He had to take some time to consider the fact that he had spent so much of the previous weeks overcome by his hopes for a future with Lady Oakley, and he was now simply needing a chance to take a breath.

But the brandy had already begun to fog his mind, ever so slightly. He was far from intoxicated, not even feeling much of the effects. He simply had that light, tipsy feeling, as though everything around him was somehow humorous when it should not be.

He had drunk enough in his life to understand that this was a concocted feeling and not something genuine. Nevertheless, when he saw Lord Boyd Stanton, the man he detested more than any other, Milton was full of rage.

The moment Lord Stanton was near enough, Milton stood to his full height and took a long stride until he was standing just in front of his enemy, unafraid and determined that he would bring this to an end here and now.

"Stanton," he said with venom.

Lord Stanton raised an eyebrow and looked him up and down.

“Eddington?” he laughed in reply.

“That is Lord Corrington to you. Or Your Grace. Either one will do,” Milton said.

“Very well, Your Grace,” Lord Stanton said with a dramatic, mocking bow.

“I know the letters were from you. I know that you have been threatening me for all this time, trying to end my engagement to Lady Oakley. It will not happen. I must tell you here and now that your attempts to destroy me will come to nothing,” Milton said.

“Is that so? And here, I trusted that you knew better,” Lord Stanton said, looking around the room at the men who were watching them.

“What is the matter? Are you nervous? Do you fear the fact that I am confronting you in front of all these men? Are you worried that they might somehow come to realise that you are not their friend? That you are a dreadful man, full of secrets, who hides behind whatever excuse he is able?” Milton asked.

“What are you speaking of?” he scoffed.

“I am speaking of a series of letters written in order that you might tear apart the love I feel for a woman who rejected you. She does not love you, and she never will. I know that you wrote them. I know that you made every effort to try and prevent me from being with her. But it will not succeed. Lady Oakley is my dearest love, and you shall never overcome that,” Milton said.

Lord Stanton straightened his back, no longer appearing as though he was amused. Instead, he seemed eager to return the bravado that Milton was showing. He seemed as though he would express his own anger in place of it.

“You deserved it,” Lord Stanton finally hissed.

Milton was quite shocked, not having expected the man to admit his wrongdoing. The fact that he had now confessed it was something of a surprise, but it was a surprise he was more than happy to accept.

“Why? Because I gave Lady Oakley a way out of being forced to marry you when she did not wish to?” he asked.

“Because you have spent all these years believing that you are better than me!” he shouted. “Just because you are a duke and I am an earl, you believe that you are a better man than I am. I needed to prove, once and for all, how wrong that was. It is not true. You are a fool and a wretch.”

Milton paused for a long moment. He understood many things to be true. The first was that he had just managed to get Lord Stanton to confess that he had played a part in this. The second was that Lord Stanton’s jealousy was quite unbelievable, even now. And the third was the realisation that, no matter what he might try in life, he would

be forever tainted by the fact that he, as a wretch, that he had failed to adequately treat many young women well in the past few years.

“How many of the men in this room have seen their sisters and their cousins betrayed by you?” Lord Stanton challenged him. “How many of them have watched the women in their lives weep for the heartless things you have done? And yet you dare to challenge me? You dare to behave as though I am the monster?” he asked.

Milton took a deep breath and looked around the room at the men who refused to make eye contact with him in return. He knew, without a doubt, that Lord Stanton was right.

“I am grieved by the behaviour that I showed. I have begun working to make it right, but I have a long way to go. I urge any man in this room who has a sister, a cousin, a loved one of any sort who was hurt by me, to tell me the woman’s name and I shall go to her and apologise,” he said.

“And that makes it all right?” Lord Stanton asked.

“It will never be right. I believe we all know that. But what I cannot make right, I can at least do my best to make amends for. Now, as much as I grieve this, it is a separate issue from what I wish to address with you. You have already admitted to the fact that you wrote those letters. So now, I order you to leave me alone and to leave Lady Oakley alone,” he said.

“You order me? I cannot be ordered. I know your family’s secret. Even if you continue on with that woman, she will die, will she not?” Lord Stanton scoffed.

The air was sucked from the room, and Milton watched the other men look to one another in confusion. Just then, Lord Stanton let out an ugly laugh.

“Well, that is the superstition anyway. I, myself, would never fall prey to such nonsensical beliefs. But you? It is clear that you have placed a faith in it that cannot be ignored,” Lord Stanton said.

“How did you learn this?” Milton asked.

“My mother,” he said, shrugging with a smug expression on his face. “You know that my disdain for you is not new to our families. My mother spoke of what happened to your own mother. She spoke of how three—or was it four?—generations ago, a woman in your family was impolite to a beggar, a traveller of some sort. The woman put a spell on the women of the family to always die during childbirth.”

Milton glared, not knowing what to say. He could not refute the truth. Whether or not the hex was real, the woman had done so.

“And every generation since, a woman in your family, on your mother’s side, has died whilst giving birth,” Lord Stanton said.

There were whispers around the room, and Milton understood that he would not be believed or thought of as anything but a fool by many of these men, who were intellectuals and great thinkers. They found the notion of spells and hexes to be nonsense.

“You know nothing about this,” Milton said.

“I have just told you *everything* about it. This is what happens to the women in your family. And if you try to bring Lady Oakley into your family by marrying her, you fear that she, too, will die,” he said.

Milton could not refute the fear in his heart. He could not pretend that it was untrue.

“What of it?” he asked, at last. Milton would not let Lord Stanton get the best of him.

“What of it, you ask? I think it is obvious. I shall warn Lady Oakley that to marry you is death—or so you believe,” he said.

“You need not tell her a thing. I shall do it for myself. I care not how you feel about the matter. I simply wish to have her in my life. And if you try to ruin whatever chance we have at happiness, I assure you that you will fail,” Milton said.

“Is that so? You think you can stop me from destroying everything you hold dear? You are a fool, to be sure,” Lord Stanton said.

“Then a fool I shall forever be,” he replied. “Anyway, this is over.”

“It is not over until you leave Lady Oakley behind and give me the freedom to marry her as I please,” Lord Stanton said.

“It is not my decision to make,” Milton said. “It is hers. I have no say at all in this matter.”

“Nonsense! You are responsible for all of this!” Lord Stanton yelled.

Milton turned to the last recourse he was able to take. He pulled the letters from his jacket and held them up in the air for all to see.

“Please, have a look, gentlemen. These are the letters sent to me by Lord Boyd Stanton, the future Earl of Henbridge. You may be shocked to see the threats he unleashes in these letters, including the threat to ruin the reputation of the woman I am betrothed to,” Milton said.

Lord Stanton scoffed.

“This is outrageous,” he said.

“You already admitted to trying to ruin me through them. You ought to have watched your own words better. Did you not even realise that you had confessed to something so ugly? Well, here you are. These are the letters that hold threats against myself and against Lady Oakley,” Milton said.

“No one cares a thing about it,” Lord Stanton said.

“Is that so? Tell me, men, do you not care?” Milton asked.

“Of course we care,” James said, stepping out among the others. It was a wonderful thing to have someone close to Milton take a stand on his behalf when Milton had not even known that he had come.

“Indeed, we do,” said another man. “If you have made threats to try and get what you want, we ought to know about them. It is only a matter of time before you make the same threats against us.”

“And what are these threats, anyway?” asked another.

“He claims, herein, that he will suggest that Lady Oakley is with child and is marrying me so that the reputation of herself and her child are maintained. Of course, she is not with child, and he expects that everyone will simply believe that the child was lost, as so many are gruesome enough to consider,” Milton said.

“Good heavens, he claimed this?” asked the first gentleman, as the others whispered amongst themselves, horrified by these allegations.

“Indeed. This was his threat. And I have little doubt that he would carry it through if given the opportunity,” Milton said.

“You know nothing. You think that because you are the great and wonderful Lord Corrington, a man who disregards the feelings of women, we ought to listen to you? You dare to criticise me for having made this threat when you have galiavanted around with any number of young women, day after day? Who are you to tell me that I am in the wrong? Who are you to tell me that I have made an error or that I must change my ways? I have done nothing but make every effort to

take care of this woman whom you have sought to take from me," he hissed.

Milton understood that his former actions had led to this, and he could not be angry with Lord Stanton for addressing it. He had, indeed, made mistakes. But he had already acknowledged themit and was willing to make amends as best he could. The fact that Lord Stanton still refused to move on was simply bothersome.

"Enough of this. I have already confessed my wrongdoing. When will you confess yours?" Milton asked him.

"I have nothing at all to confess. This is simply a matter which you are harping after me. I have done nothing wrong, and I trust that any man here would defend me in light of that," Lord Stanton said.

"That is hardly going to be true," mumbled Lord Bilsby.

Milton glanced at him and gave an appreciative nod. He noted how every man there appeared equally shocked by the display before them. But there was nothing to be done about it, really. Lord Stanton refused to admit that he was in the wrong, that he had done something purely despicable.

"Well, it appears as though you have all these men on your side. But, as it happens, I do not need their approval. Or yours. You are a man full of arrogance and an appalling lack of character. I would never subject myself to wishing that you would show me favour of any kind. Enough of you!" Lord Stanton said.

Milton shook his head, laughing in amusement after this shocking behaviour. He could hardly believe that he was facing someone with such denial and self-indulgence. It was the worst display he thought he had ever seen in all his life.

“Very well, Lord Stanton. I agree. That is more than enough from you,” Milton said.

Immediately, Lord Stanton shifted, his fury bulging through the purple veins in his red face.

“How dare you! I would never want to be with that woman anyway! I could never marry her. She is a terrible, dreadful woman,” he insisted, making an entirely different claim than anything he had previously expressed.

Milton was puzzled by this sudden shift in his words and the fact that Lord Stanton appeared to believe that this was a better strategy for defending himself. Now that he was expressing denial of his interest in Lady Oakley, all the men surrounding them appeared equally as confused. It made little sense, and Milton could hardly believe that Lord Stanton was responding in this way.

“How can you shift with such suddenness? I thought you longed for her,” James asked, laughing with disbelief.

“I never said such a thing. I wished to marry her because she is a beautiful woman, and there is no denying that. But she is far too bull-headed,” Lord Stanton scoffed, trying to land the insult.

But Milton simply smiled, thinking about the woman he loved.

“Indeed, she is,” he said. “And that is precisely what makes her so wonderful.”

Chapter 31

The last thing Tess expected now was to see Lord Corrington. He had made it clear to her that he would no longer be in her life. After all that had passed between them, he had utterly vanished.

She had lost all hope, imagined that he would never come to see her again. And Tess had accepted that as fact., Sshe had decided she would simply try to move on, to live her life regardless of the fact that he seemed to care nothing for her anymore.

But when she saw him exiting the coach outside her home, a fresh look of anticipation on his face, she was a mix of fury, joy, and surprise.

Had he truly come? She was so happy to see him. But how could he dare face her after what he had done? None of it made any sense. He would have to have a very good excuse for his behaviour.

And Tess would have to decide how exactly she wished to behave in light of it.

But he was seen to the drawing room, where she sat with a book in hands, just as she was always prone to do upon a visitor's arrival. Stiffly, Tess stood and curtseyed, keeping her face a blank slate, devoid of emotion.

“Lady Oakley,” he greeted with a bow.

“Please, do be seated,” she said. “Unless you are not staying.”

“I would like to stay, so long as you will allow me,” he said, fiddling with a hat in his hands and taking a seat.

Tess said nothing more, simply waited for him to be willing to speak first. She had learned long ago that a woman must never be the first to speak. It was not a matter of silence before a man. It was a matter of maintaining all the power in the conversation. If he was uncomfortable enough to speak as he wished, she would allow him to mumble his thoughts until he had finished.

“Lady Oakley, I thank you for being willing to see me. I know that the past week has been rather a strange one, and I am certain that my silence has bothered you,” he said.

“Only in that it has gotten in the way of my plans to avoid Lord Stanton,” she said.

Lord Corrington looked at her sheepishly, that hat still shuffled between his fingers.

“I would like to tell you that Lord Stanton shall no longer be an inconvenience for you. He has been dealt with, and I expect that society is soon to deal him a rather cold hand,” he said.

Tess was curious to know more about this, but before she could ask, Lord Corrington moved on.

“I would ask that you give me an opportunity to explain to you my recent behaviour and why I have been so unresponsive to you,” he said.

“You owe me nothing. Is that not a part of our plan?” she asked.

“Actually, whatever our plan happened to be, I fear that I could not maintain my efforts to hold to it. You see, Lady Oakley, I am a very flawed man, of course, but I am a man nonetheless. And this man you see before you? He is a man who has come to care for you with a depth I could otherwise not express,” he said.

Tess’s heart skipped at that. She had not expected to see him at all, but this was entirely shocking. To think that he was actually declaring his affection for her? That was something else entirely. If he was admitting that he liked her, that she meant something to him, Tess thought that her entire world might be shifting for the better. She truly cared for Lord Corrington. To think that he might care for her as well was the greatest thing she had ever heard.

“What exactly do you mean by this?” she asked.

“I think you know precisely what I mean, but it would give me great pleasure to tell you,” he said.

Tess took a deep breath and nodded for him to continue.

“Very well. I would like to tell you first the story behind all of this. It is lengthy, and I do apologise for that, but I hope that you can understand and that you will bear with me,” he said.

“If it gives me answers, I would be more than happy,” she said.

“Excellent. Then you must know that there is a very good reason for my behaviour—and a very bad one,” he said.

“I do not understand,” she said.

“No, I do not expect that you would. You see, it is quite terrible. But the reason I have avoided marriage all these years has nothing to do with my wanting to galiavant around with one woman or another. It is nothing of the sort. In fact, my reason for my behaviour is because of something quite different,” he said.

“And that is?”

“There is a legend in my family. On my mother’s side, there was a time when her family, descended from nobility, were less than kind. One day, my great-great-grandmother looked down upon a woman who begged for a pittance. Rather than being kind and giving her even a morsel of bread, my ancestor scoffed at her and walked away, muttering to herself about the woman’s smell and appearance,” he explained.

Tess still could not understand what any of this had to do with his choice of whether or not to marry. She did not know what it had to do with her at all. But it was a very intriguing story, and she continued listening, surprised that there had ever been an unkind person in his family.

“My great-great-grandmother went through the village shops with her father and mother, who were searching for a pair of fine shoes as she was to enter society that year. But as they were searching, she found herself alone, lost in the maze of the village a. And there, before her, was the impoverished woman,” he continued.

“The legend states that the woman dropped some herbs before my great-great-grandmother’s feet and muttered some sort of incantation. She swore that my great-great-grandmother would marry that year, and she would give birth the next. But after that, she would perish with the second childbirth. And that all generations which came after her would face the same fate,” he said.

Tess was stunned. She had never heard of such a thing. Was it possible that there had been some sort of a spell put on his family? She did not know whether or not to believe in such things. After all, she, along with nearly everyone else in England, strictly adhered to the teachings of the church. And yet, even in the Bible, there were condemnations against the use of witchcraft. Did that mean that this was possible?

She couldn’t be sure. And even if it was, what did it have to do with her?

“Her surviving child was a daughter, my great-grandmother, who gave birth to my grandmother and then died with her second child. Following that, my grandmother gave birth to three healthy children before she succumbed with the fourth. And then, there was my own

mother. She gave birth to me. And after me, she passed away," he said.

"That is positively tragic. I am so dreadfully sorry that you have endured all of this. And you have not spoken of it? But surely there has to be another explanation. Childbirth is a wonderful business, but it can also be dangerous for some," Tess reasoned, having known that such tragedies were possible.

"Yes, I know that. It is possible that there was another reason that they all passed away from childbirth. But I cannot help but fear that the curse is true, that the woman actually made this happen against the women of my family," he said.

"But I am not a woman from your family. Has it happened to women who have married into the family as well?" she asked, knowing it was the right thing to question this suspicion.

"Not to my knowledge. I understand this seems foolish, but I was always concerned. I did not know if it could be possible. I lost my mother, Lady Oakley. I lost her, and I would not suffer to lose another woman who is important to me," he said.

"But you could have told me, a. And then, we could have moved on from it. I would have known about your concern," she said.

"Indeed, you would have known then, but that is not the only reason that I avoided you. You see, Lord Stanton began to write me letters, threatening me after all that had taken place. He wished to get me to leave you alone. Because of this, he told me that he would spread rumours regarding your character and reputation. He would suggest that you were with my child, and that is why we decided to marry,"

he said.

“Goodness! I found a letter from him. I had hoped to ask you about it, but I never thought he had truly sent you any. I saw mention of other letters, but I had hoped he had never sent them as he had never sent this one,” she said.

“I expect that he intended to send it. But yes, I received two letters from him. And he has now confessed it in public. Therefore, your reputation is secured. You have nothing to worry about because all the men at my gentleman’s club have seen and heard from his own lips that he is responsible for this. I hope you know that I would never do anything to risk your suffering, and I have made every effort to stop him from taking part in hurting you,” Lord Corrington said.

Tess could not help but trust and believe him. He had given her every reason to think that he meant his words, that he really did want what was best for her. He had been her defender when this terrible man had risen up against her, a. And now, as she tried to seek justice for the future, Tess reasoned that this was the only choice she had. She would not allow anyone to stand in her way.

“Forgive me for both things that I feared. I know that there are other reasons that there could have been problems for the generations of women in my family, but I truly fear the thought of my child growing up without a mother. I could not bear to be the cause of such a sad thing,” he said.

“I understand,” Tess said. She didn’t wish to discount his concerns, even if she did believe that there had to be another reason. She disbelieved that this curse would somehow befall her, but she would make every effort to prevent Lord Corrington from having to struggle against the possibility of it. She simply wished for him to know that she would be sensitive to his worries, no matter what.

“I do believe I ought to tell you that the women in my family are very hardy. We have very easy pregnancies and births. We are a good deal more fortunate than many others, and all my mother’s sisters have asked her why she would not have more children,” Tess said with a laugh.

“Is that so?” he asked.

“Indeed. I believe my mother does not have the instinct for motherhood, but I was delivered with ease. My aunts each have three to four children, an. And my mother was a child among eight. For many generations, it has been very simple for the women in my family. I assure you, a. And I trust that this is something I will bring into…into my future. No matter what,” Tess said, trying to think how she could word what she truly wanted to say.

She took a deep breath and chose to be brave.

“If you are able to overcome your fears, I…” Tess trailed off. She could not volunteer for marriage when he had not asked for it. The last thing she wanted was to embarrass herself by making the assumption that he wanted the same thing she desired. It was nonsense to allow herself to show that hope. Instead, Tess simply had to remain silent and wait for him to decide if he was willing to express such an affection or not. And, if he was, she would then be able to tell him how hopeful she was for their future.

Lord Corrington smiled at Tess, and he reached across to take her hand.

“Is there something you would like to say?” he asked, gently.

She said nothing in reply. It was clear from the sparkle in his eyes that Lord Corrington knew precisely what she wished to say, but he was giving her the chance to come out with it before telling her his own thoughts. It was a deeply kind and thoughtful thing of him to do, but Tess wanted to hear the words from him first. She was not ready to say that she would undo a lifetime of commitment to spinsterhood for his sake.

“I believe I have said quite a lot, and I should like to give you the opportunity to share your thoughts,” she said.

Lord Corrington grinned and nodded.

“Very well, Lady Oakley. Then I should like to tell you that I have, indeed, come to think of you, not as the woman with whom I am meant to play a part and put on a display, but I have come to think of you as the woman who means more to me than I ever thought any woman would,” he said.

“And what, precisely, is thatdoes that mean?” Tess asked.

“I have come to think of you as a woman I would very much like to marry,” he said.

Lord Corrington stood just enough to come before Tess and kneel in front of her. He held her hands more tightly in his own and looked up into her eyes. She felt that he was not simply looking at her. He was

seeing her. She felt known for the first time in her life, and it was a truly wondrous feeling.

"Lady Oakley, I understand that the entirety of London believes us to be engaged, but we do not. I should like to change that," he said.

"If you would be willing, if you would set aside your fears that I might try to control you and if you would accept that I am a flawed man who is trying very hard to be better, I should be honoured if you would be my wife," he said. "Truly. Not out of a need for someone to hide behind, b. But out of love and the hope of a better future to come."

The word escaped from Tess before she could stop it.

"Yes!" she cried, throwing her arms around Lord Corrington.

He embraced her in turn, and it was clear to them both that their former ideas of marriage had meant nothing. All that mattered was this.

Epilogue

Milton was thrilled to prepare himself for the wedding day that had finally arrived. After proposing to Tess properly, he had been desperate for the day to come swiftly, and they had agreed to wait a mere month before meeting at the altar.

For Milton, as he expected it was for Tess, this had been a dramatic shift in thinking. And yet, he could not have been happier, and knowing that he was to spend his days with her was the most remarkable thing in all the world.

Nothing could make him any happier. And aAs he put on his top hat, the final touch of the outfit he would wear for his wedding, Milton knew that he had finally discovered the man that he was always meant to be. He would be the husband of the most incredibley woman in all the world, and that was all he needed.

“Ah, there you are!” James said. “Your aunt is here. She said that she would wait downstairs until you are ready to see her, b. But is there anything I might be able to help you with?” James asked.

“No, thank you. I am perfectly all right. I do believe, in fact, that I am ready,” he said.

“Yes, indeed, you do look to be. I expect that your wife is going to be thrilled no matter what you look like, so I would not worry if I were you,” James teased.

“Ah, so you think I am not quite ready?” he asked.

“Indeed, you are fine. Now, shall we go? Your aunt wishes to see you and the wedding is going to begin soon enough. You would not wish to keep your bride waiting,” James insisted.

Milton made his way down the stairs and found his aunt patiently waiting for him in the study. She was seated with a cup of tea that the maid must have brought, and she appeared quite ready for the day ahead—just as Milton was.

“Ah, Milton! There you are. You look terrific. Now, let me have a better look at you. Turn,” she ordered.

He did not have a moment to properly greet her before obeying as she wished. He presented himself before her, and she grinned.

“You look wonderful. Now, tell me, are you ready to be a husband? You may look wonderful, but that is only one small part of it. As for the marriage? That is a good deal more important,” she said.

“Yes, I know. And I do feel ready. I hope that I am able to learn how to be a good husband. She deservesd the best of men, and I would like to believe that I can be that,” he said.

“You are a wonderful man, Milton. Just continue being as you are. Now, I do believe that we must be on our way soon enough. What do you say? Are you ready?” she asked.

“Of course. Is that all? You came to escort me to the church?” he asked in surprise.

“Is that not enough?” she asked.

“No, that is not what I meant. Actually, I wish to thank you. It is difficult not having a mother or father to go with me. But you are here, and you have chosen to care for me as I enter this new life with Tess. I am grateful,” he said.

“That’s a good lad. But, as it happens, you were right. There is one other thing,” she said.

His aunt pulled a pocket watch out from her purse and placed it in his hand.

“It is beautiful,” he said.

“Yes, it is. Gold. I do believe it is highly valuable,” she said.

“And why are you giving it to me?” Milton asked, still unsure of the gesture.

“On my wedding day, your father gave it to my husband. He said that it was a gift to remember that time is always something we may monitor if we wish. We may choose to waste it, or we may choose to make the best use of it. The time we have within marriage is just as

important," she said.

"I married shortly after your mother died, you know," she said. "I felt awful for marrying when my brother had just lost his only love, but he urged me to do so anyway, saying that it would bring a bit of happiness amidst a difficult season. So, I obeyed him. I married. And I believe he realised then, more than ever, that we have only so much time with those we love."

His aunt's eyes welled up with tears. She still mourned her own loss, even though she was soon to be engaged to another man. But Milton wished to accept her advice. He would be the best husband he could possibly be, and he would not take for granted the time he had with Tess. He would live his life with her to the fullest, and they would make every effort to be wise with what they were given.

"Nowt, that is all I wished to say. We must go, or you shall be late for your own wedding, and no one—particularly not your wife—will forgive you for such a mistake. That is the first moment in time that you must not be late," she teased.

Milton and his aunt, along with James, took the coach to the church. When they arrived, he entered the building, where there were many friends of his seated throughout. The choir in the corner, a surprise for Tess, began to sing.

It was only moments before the doors opened, and Tess was revealed, making her way down the aisle, alongside her father, with a bright smile, a shapely dress, and her blonde hair piled atop her head in a stunning fashion.

She walked steadily, but he could see the excitement in her face. Like

hims, she clearly wished to run and to begin the ceremony at once.

By the time she finally reached him, Milton took her hand from her father and smiled at them both.

“The Edgerton Choir?” she whispered in surprise.

“Only the best for you, my dear,” he replied.

The minister cleared his throat, and they were silent, allowing him to begin.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here, this day, to support the union of a man and a woman who came together, baffling the eyes of men, and bringing great joy before the eyes of God,” the minister began.

Milton chuckled and nodded, thinking about how inauspicious their beginning truly was. There was no reason these two of them ought to have come together. It made very little sense, truly. They were not the sort of people who ever really belonged together because they were two people who believed they never belonged in marriage at all.

But now, alas, here they were. They stood there, in the midst of their wedding ceremony, more in love than they had ever been before. It was a remarkable moment, and Milton wondered how it had all come to this, but he was unwilling to question it now that Tess was in his life.

“If there is any reason that these two should not be married, please speak now or forever hold your peace,” the minister said, giving a brief pause for the guests to speak up if they must.

There was a cleared throat from halfway towards the back of the church. It wasoundeds the set of sound as though the person was trying to suggest that there might, indeed, be a problem.

Milton looked up and searched for the source of the soundinterruption. There, near the back, he saw Lord Henbridge, sitting there and looked as stuffy and obnoxious as ever. Of course, this wedding had been arranged to be between Tess and his own son, but Milton was not going to allow that man to ruin anything.

It appeared as though the minister understood, and he quickly moved on.

“And now, for the vows,” he said.

It was only a short time later that the wedding had come to an end, and Milton and Tess were declared husband and wife. Forever.

“May I?” Milton asked, taking her hand. She gave it freely, and he led her through the church and out the front doors. They intended to make their way to the wedding breakfast, where the rest of their friends and guests were awaiting them.

When they arrived in the park where the breakfast was held, Milton and Tess began greeting everyone. Rue and James had been at the wedding, but they had not spent a good deal of time together, nor had

they really interacted with Tess's family or anyone else.

Although they'd had more guests than most would have, Milton recognized that they had not said much to any of them. Now, however, as they were at the park for the breakfast, he was smiling and grinning and greeting as many people as he could, even though he truly wanted nothing more than a chance to breathe and actually speak with Tess.

"Good heavens, this is overwhelming," she said with a laughgh, the moment they had a break between visitors.

"Indeed, it is. I had expected that we would interact with our guests, but there are so many here," he said.

"And how did Lord Henbridge get into the church? I cannot imagine what possessed him," Tess said.

"Nor I. It was, indeed, a very strange thing," he said.

"Very well, I cannot abide it for now, anyway. I do not see him here, and that is all that matters," Tess said.

"I certainly agree. Besides, I am here with my wife, and that is all that truly matters. What do you say? Shall we eat some cake and then depart for our home?" he asked.

Tess grinned upward at him, and Milton found it utterly tempting to

kiss her on the tip of her nose before he managed to restrain himself froorm doing so. Instead, he simply took a deep breath, and they made their way around, continuing to speak and interact with others.

The breakfast had drifted into lunch, and it was nearly one in the afternoon before they were able to depart, at last. The choirce had ceased in their song, and many of the guests had begun to drift away.

“It was wonderful to see you both,” Milton said, giving his goodbye to Tess’s mother and father.

“And we are delighted for the two of you as you begin this journey of marriage with one another,” her mother said in reply.

They also said their goodbyes to Milton’s aunt, at which point he was wishing that he’d had a bit more time with her that morning. But his bride awaited him, and they were finally going to go to their home at his estate and rest after the long and weary day.

By the time they arrived, Milton was overcome by the emotions that had held him back for so long. He could not believe that he was able to experience this much joy in being married. For most of his life, he had allowed himself to believe that marriage was undesirable. After all, he needed to believe as much. He could not give himself a chance to think that anything good would come from it, after all.

“What do you say, my dear? Do you like your new home?” Milton asked, looking out the window at the house he and Tess would share, the estate that had been in his family for generations.

“Very much. It is stunning. I am overjoyed to be the mistress of such a home,” she said.

“And do you think that we will have a very great future here? A future with children and balls and friends and all manner of excitement and entertainment?” he asked.

“I hope for just that. I believe that we can make this the most splendid place in all the world,” Tess said.

Milton led her from the coach to the stairs and through the doors into the manor. There, strewn along the floor, were rose petals leading to their room. Tess followed him, and Milton led her there, to where there was a small table set up on the balcony.

“Shall we sit for a while and take in the view?” he asked.

“I would like that very much,” Tess replied, grinning. He sensed that she was somewhat nervous about their new arrangement as husband and wife, but he trusted that she would be happy and that he would show her how wonderful their life together would be.

They spent time together there, just looking out over the gardens and the lake beyond, taking in the sight as the sun began to set. Eventually, the maid brought out their dinner and served them there, on the balcony.

“It is wonderful,” Tess said, taking another bite of her meal.

“You think so?” he asked.

“Indeed. Thank you for making this afternoon so special,” she replied.

But Milton had not yet shown her the main thing he had planned. He waited until she had finished her meal, and then they enjoyed a nice dessert. They continued to talk and laugh and reminisce about the times they had already experienced together.

But oOnce all of that began to wind down, Milton led Tess back inside and down to the hall.

There, in the dim glow of candlelight, was the Edgerton Choir, singing a love harmony in four parts. Tess looked at Milton with shock in her eyes, and he smiled at having managed to surprise her once more.

“Shall we dance?” he asked.

“Dance?” she repeated, still seeming in awe of the moment.

Milton responded by taking her hand and leading her in a slow, gentle dance. He hoped that it would convey to her every last bit of what was in his heart and how desperately he longed to enjoy their days, hour by hour.

“You have made this day so remarkable,” she said.

“I tried to. I am not sure that I was as successful as I would have liked to have been, but so long as you found it special, I suppose I have succeeded,” he said.

“You have succeeded. More than succeeded. I am so grateful,” Tess said.

Milton continued to dance with her, enjoying the graceful movements they shared until four songs had passed, and he noted that Tess had stifled a yawn.

“It has been a long day, has it not?” he asked.

“Forgive me. Yes, it has. A very enjoyable one, but a long one, nonetheless,” she said.

“Well, then…if you would, we ought to get a bit of rest,” Milton said.

He led Tess up the stairs and to their room, pausing outside the door.

“I love you, Tess Eddington,” he said.

“And I love you, Milton Eddington,” she replied.

Milton took her hand and gave it a kiss, knowing that this was only the beginning.

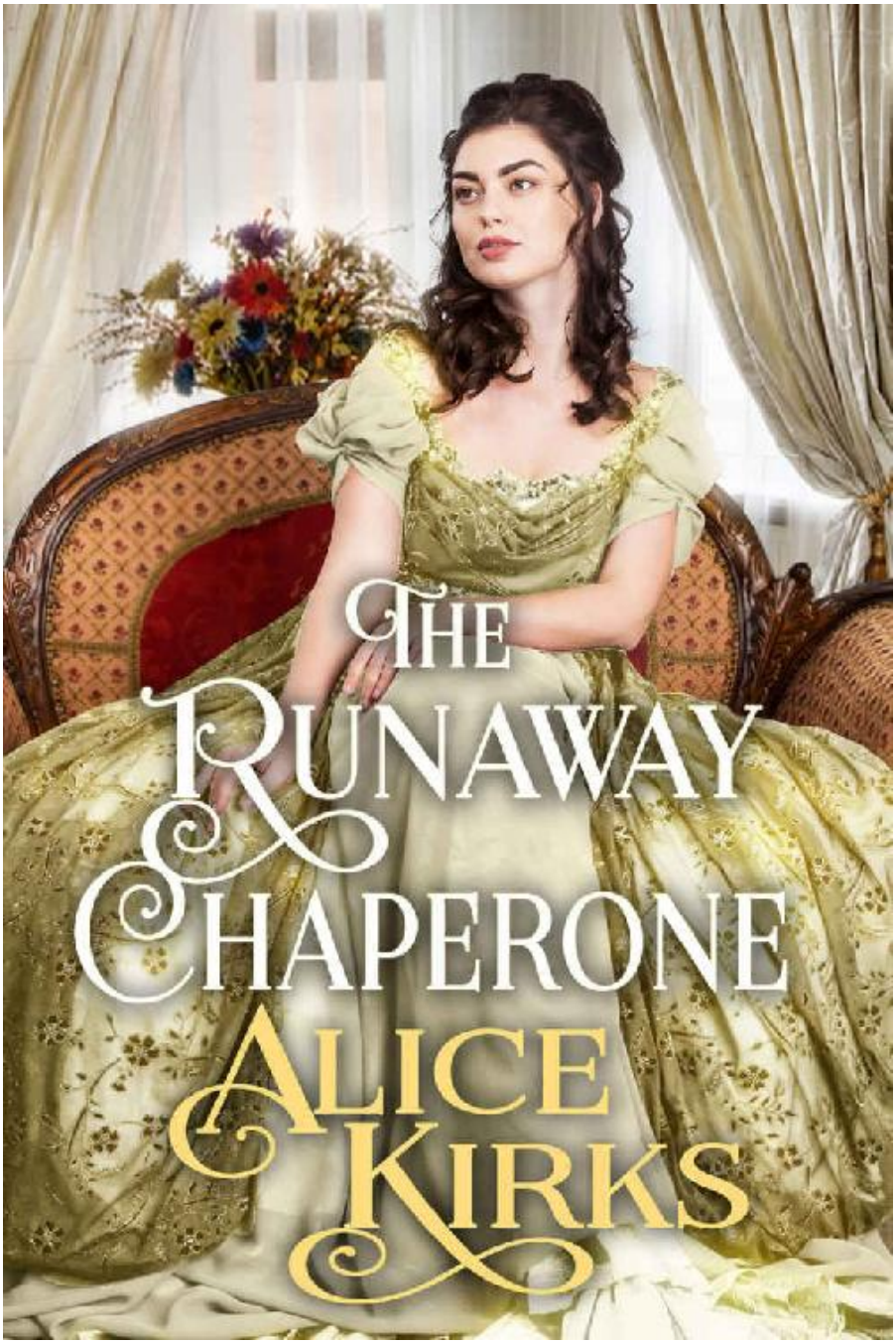
THE END

Can't get enough of Tess and Milton? Then make sure to check out the Extended Epilogue to find out…

Which place will Tess and Milton be visiting and for what interesting purpose?
What news could Tess and Rue share about Lord Stanton? Could he have changed over time, or will he remain the same bitter person?
How will Tess feel about her husband defending the end of slavery and fighting for equality in their country??

Click the link or enter it into your browser
http://alicekirks.com/tess

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from **“The Runaway Chaperone”**, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*


THE
RUNAWAY
CHAPERONE
ALICE
KIRKS

The Runaway Chaperone

Introduction

Forced into a loveless betrothal with a man who terrifies her, Alexandra Drake decides to run away from home. As luck would have it, she is then hired as a chaperone for a dashing Duke's younger sister. While it seems to be an easy position for an accomplished woman like her, keeping an eye on the young girl will prove harder than she expected. To make matters more complicated, Alexandra will inevitably find herself falling in love with her charming employee and unable to think of anything else than his captivating eyes... Could Alexandra ignore her growing feelings for the sake of conventional rules? Will true love manage to shine through the emotional whirlwind that has turned her world upside down?

Matthew Lammore has been the Duke of Blakeley since the tragic loss of his parents when he was only fifteen. This entire time, the responsibility of taking care of the estate and his beloved sister has fallen upon his shoulders. However, as his sister has reached the age of sixteen, he will need a well educated person to help her prepare for her debut into Society. Luckily for him, he finds the most appropriate woman for this role, who among other talents, seems to also have a heart of gold. Little did he know though that the beautiful chaperone would exceed her role and end up being the breath of fresh air he has longed for, casting light upon his dull life. This doesn't however alter his awareness of how inappropriate it would be for a Duke to fall in

love with his own employee. Will Matthew defy social norms and give true love a chance? Or will he turn down the woman of his dreams out of fear of ruining his reputation?

The more Matthew and Alexandra fall for each other, the more they realize they are moving towards a tangled labyrinth. As if this wasn’t enough, Alexandra's secret past is haunting her and threatening to tear this blossoming romance apart. Will the two soulmates dare to take the leap of real love and have faith in each other? In the end, will they declare their undeniable feelings, or will they be overpowered by the threatening internal and external obstacles?

Prologue

Alexandra looked out of the window, her dark hair spilling over one eye, obscuring her view a moment. She felt sick, her palms slippery with sweat. She had to move fast.

She tiptoed down the hallway to her bedroom, opened the door and reached for her suitcase. She didn't need to think about packing now; it was ready, a week of careful planning going into this escape.

Her hands were slippery on the handle of the case. It was the one chance she had.

Now.

She gripped her suitcase, went along the long corridor and ran down to the front door.

"Go, go," she urged herself as she shut the door. She had escaped detection, but now she had to move! There was every possibility that someone would see her in the street. She had to run.

She looked down the darkening street, running briskly, aware of the danger all around now. It was not that late, but the nights descended faster as the year moved to wintery cold and frost. She drew her cloak around her.

“Hey there!” a man shouted as she stepped into the street. Freezing with fear, Alexandra turned to stare at him, but he was only shouting because she’d got in his way. Heart thumping, she ran up the street, joints aching at the weight of the heavy suitcase. She’d barely taken anything with her, but the suitcase itself – big and cumbersome – was hefty.

I need a coach to take me away from here, and fast.

The first coach was battered and dark-varnished with no insignia; the coach of one of the drivers who gave lifts to people about the city for a fee. Alexandra swallowed hard. Aware of how dangerous it was for a woman to travel on her own, she scratched in her purse to find the coins.

“Here,” she said, passing them up.

“In you get, then,” the driver said, checking the coins and counting them.

Alexandra gritted her teeth, aware that every second was immensely important, then hauled her case into the coach. She put it down and shut her eyes, content now the door was shut.

She was out of the house and safe. All she needed to do now was get away.

Every second was the difference between danger and freedom.

The drive was short, but it was already starting to get dark, the sky black against the flare of lamplight in the windows of public-houses as they went swiftly past. Alexandra felt her heart thump fearfully as they stopped.

“Here you are, lass,” the driver said. “Now, you’re sure you’ll be all right?”

“Yes,” she said.

There were people all over – some smartly-dressed gentlemen and ladies in big cloaks, and some men pushing barrows from the edge of the square, or carts with nightsoil. She felt frightened.

“Does the stage-coach stop here?” she asked a group of people, standing near a fencepost. Their faces shone in the lamplight from a nearby window.

“No…we’re waiting for the Last Judgement,” the man retorted.

Alexandra grinned, her ready humor unable to resist the joke, even in this danger. “The coach is good enough for me. Thank you.”

She still had a long drive to reach Blakeley and the job she had taken there.

She stood with the people and, when the coach arrived, she let the

driver take her luggage. She sank gratefully into the back and shut her eyes, desperate for sleep.

The lifting and rolling of the coach soon set her into a drowse. She recalled the afternoon – the interview with the Duke's chief of staff had been surprisingly simple, despite her terrors. Not that she would have expected the questions to be that difficult – her aim was to work as a chaperone for the Duke's sister. She had felt lucky to hear about the opportunity.

Alexandra opened one brown eye as the coach went over a bump, then shut it again, sleepily. She had some idea of what the job would entail, and oddly she wasn't too nervous – she felt sure that a young girl could be a pleasing companion, and the age-difference was only eight years. At four-and-twenty years old herself, she would be a friendlier chaperone than the young girl of sixteen might expect.

"Here we are, Miss…Blakeley Heights."

She looked up at Blakely Heights as she walked from the coach. She could see the edges of the building against the sky – it was three floors at least, crowned with imposing turrets. As she got closer, she saw windows glinting in the dark night, though it was all unlit, save a torch burning by the front door.

"Good evening?" she said, waiting for the butler to greet her as he opened up.

"Are you the governess?" he asked.

Alexandra swallowed. “I am the chaperone…Alexandra Ilfield, yes.”

“Oh. In you get, then,” he nodded, jerking his head at her. “Let’s have your bags…you get yourself upstairs. Mrs. Watford will deal with you.”

“Thank you,” Alexandra said, a touch stiffly. He was really terribly rude! She tried to ignore the tingle of fear down her spine as she went inside.

She looked around. The hallway was marble-floored, the ceiling soaring above them into darkness. The stairs were broad, and faced with pale stone that gleamed in the light of the lamps.

“Good evening,” the housekeeper greeted her when she reached the top floor. “You’re the chaperone, are you not?”

Up here, the scenery was quite different – the beauty of the hallway had altered drastically: the walls were bare wood, the floor uncarpeted, the lamp bracketed to the wall sputtery with poor-quality oil.

“Um, yes. Good evening,” Alexandra said hesitantly.

“Here’s your room. Now, we put you right on the top floor, so there’ll be no sneaking out late. You understand?”

“I beg your…” Alexandra began. The woman sniffed.

“You’re a servant, like one of us – don’t care how fancy you think you are ‘cos you get to sit down with the nobs. You’ll be answerable to me.”

Alexandra felt her cheeks pale, insult and anger rooting her to the spot.

“I don’t think anything of the sort,” she said instantly. “I’ll go and rest now, if you please…I had a long journey and I’m tired and whatever *I think* of someone, I think it’s best not to treat them appallingly. Goodnight.”

She walked past the woman and into the room, shutting the door behind her.

She heard the woman gasp, and then the sound of her approaching the door.

As soon as she’d gone, Alexandra opened the door. She had to find her bag!

She heard swift footsteps coming towards her and stopped.

A man in a black suit stopped too. He was tall, with sandy hair and a long, firm-jawed face. He had a high cravat about his neck, fashionably fastened, and his body was lithe and strong, the long jacket and velvety breeches showing his firm muscle. He looked at her

with mild surprise. It was his eyes that held her attention, though – dark, wide and cool, they drew her in.

"Um…" Alexandra tried to think. "Good evening. I'm looking for my suitcase?"

"Ah. The butler, Mr. Denning, has it. If you can wait here, he'll give it to you. Please don't disturb me further…the house is full of guests now."

"Oh." Alexandra stared at him. He was already walking away, his tall back turned to her.

"Here you are, Miss," the butler said, heaving her suitcase to the foot of the stairs. "I'll take it up for you. Now, I trust you found your sleeping-place?"

"Yes, I did," Alexandra said. "Thank you."

"No trouble, Miss. Good night."

Alexandra nodded to him and shut the door. She closed her eyes. Every moment was worth it, for a life of freedom.

As she rinsed her face and tucked her dark hair back into a bun for sleeping, she found that, despite all the fears of the day, the one thing that stayed on her mind was her meeting with the dark-haired man. She presumed he was the Duke, and he was, she thought, quite

handsome, even if he was quite distant. His manner had been confusing – at once rude and not too unfair.

She fell asleep wondering what would happen tomorrow.

Chapter 1

Alexandra woke, stretched, and took a moment to tuck a strand of hair behind one ear. She didn't feel too tired, and she'd slept heavily following her escape. She studied her reflection in the distorted, silvery mirror on the wall. It was a small looking glass, but one part of it worked reasonably well and it showed her a long oval face with a graceful dark brow, a slim nose, and pale skin. Her eyes were wide and black-lashed, and she thought their dark depths looked frightened.

"Now, there's no good in being frightened. You're safe here," she told herself.

She nodded. She was safe here and, when she was dressed in her high-necked cream gown with its long, starched sleeves, she felt sure nobody from home would recognize her.

"That's silly," she giggled. Nobody from her home would ever think to look here. Besides, she reasoned, they wouldn't think about the possibility that she would have been given this job.

She knew, though, that she was well-prepared.

"Good morning," she greeted the butler briskly, walking past him as she headed down the hallway. "Can you tell me where the schoolroom is, please? And where I might find breakfast?"

"Yes, Miss. Schoolroom's over there. Breakfast's downstairs. I thought

you said you weren't a governess?"

"I'm not," Alexandra said, nodding. "But, if Lady Arabella and I will be friends, we should have a good understanding of each other. And part of my job is to prepare Lady Arabella for society, is it not? So, we shall be spending a good part of each day in here, studying important materials and skills."

The butler gawped. "Yes, Miss."

Alexandra grinned as he walked away. It felt like a victory, if a small one.

She went into the schoolroom and sat down at the desk.

"Books. What do they have, I wonder…they have Byron? Yes. Good, and Shelley. And…well, there are a lot of books about the Continent in here…I wonder who reads those?" She ran a hand down the wood, staring at the books that lined the shelves.

The Duke, she reckoned, must be a strange man if he had prepared all these for the education of his sister. Most men, she imagined, would wish their sisters to present themselves in society, and not to be thoroughly learned on the grounds for the Napoleonic conflicts! She found herself smiling.

What would he have said if he'd been the one hiring her, she wondered?

Her stomach growled, and she was just standing up to find breakfast when she heard footsteps in the hallway.

“Now, Arabella…don’t run…”

“Brother! I can’t help it!” a high voice replied. “I’m so excited! Oh, where is she? Where is Miss Ilfield?”

Alexandra swallowed hard, hastily turning to the door. A small, brown-haired bundle exploded into the room, wrapping her arms about her. Behind her walked the man from the previous evening. Alexandra stiffened.

“Alexandra!” the girl said, looking up. “Oh! Here you are. I may call you that, yes? Only, Brother thinks we must be formal. We don’t need to be formal…you’re to be my confidante. And you do look like an Alexandra, don’t you? So tall and pretty!”

Alexandra grinned. She had expected Arabella to be shy, difficult, and possibly spoiled. Here, she was holding the hand of a happy, grinning girl who looked up at her wide-eyed. She was delightful! Her fear of the dark-haired man was forgotten. She grinned.

“Arabella…don’t be…”

“Yes, brother.”

To Alexandra's surprise, he nodded respectfully to her. "Good morning, Miss Ilfield. You have just met my sister, Lady Arabella. Arabella, yes, this is Miss Ilfield. I am sure that, with her permission, you may call her by her first name?" He looked at Alexandra.

"Yes," Alexandra said at once, her gaze dropping to the young girl.

"Oh! Hurray! Brother don't go yet…you must promise to take us into the village someday. I can't wait to show Alexandra all the shops there!" Her green eyes opened wide, large in her slim, pretty countenance.

"Yes, Arabella," the Duke said. He was clearly discomforted. "I shall take you there when I have a spare day. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must eat my breakfast. I have to go out with Albert later – we are going to discuss the shipping-trade."

"Oh, brother…well, I shall be here with Alexandra, and that'll be so much better than having to wait for you for hours to get back! I'll see you at breakfast in a moment…has Alexandra had breakfast?"

Alexandra, feeling her stomach rumble, gestured awkwardly. This beautiful youngster couldn't possibly expect her to dine with them!

"Um…I'll organize it," she said.

"Fine!" Arabella smiled. "Now, if you'll excuse me, Alexandra…I must hurry. Matthew is going out soon and I want to have breakfast before he goes!"

“Of course,” Alexandra nodded. The Duke, in the hallway, seemed relieved. Matthew. His name was Matthew. Alexandra nodded to him.

What an odd pair.

She felt her heart warm at the thought of Lady Arabella – her young charge was wonderful! She had only met her for a few minutes, but she already felt surprisingly fond of her. And the Duke…

She bit her lip. What could she think? Handsome, yes, he certainly was, but she had no idea to his character. He was fond of his sister, though, and that showed he couldn’t be as bad as his manner suggested.

“Miss?” a maid said, appearing at the door. “Mr. Derring wanted to know if you’d be joining us for breakfast? Only it’s almost time to pack up.”

“Oh!” Alexandra nodded swiftly. “Yes. I’ll be down directly.”

The kitchen downstairs was oppressively hot and crowded, and nobody was friendly. She had felt the need to eat alone. She took some bread and tea back to the schoolroom.

She looked up as somebody knocked.

“Miss Ilfield?” the Duke said and bowed. “I must request a talk with you. I had no opportunity to interview you myself, but of course I wish to discuss the support of my sister.”

“Yes, of course,” Alexandra agreed, getting up from the desk. She stared at him in surprise. She had absolutely not expected him to come in here, much less to talk to her alone. Such an important person would surely have other things to do than interview the chaperone?

The Duke drew back a chair and they both sat down. Alexandra faced him, heart thudding.

“What do you view as your role, Miss Ilfield?” he asked. His voice was serious, his expression closed, as if she were standing accused before a court. Alexandra felt a shiver run down her spine. It wasn’t nerves, though – she didn’t really understand what she was feeling. Whatever it was, it was making her heart thump and palms sweat with anticipation.

“I view my role as a support and companion for your sister, but someone who is able to guide her and teach her the skills necessary to make a good impression in society. I will train her in the arts, languages, and comportment, as well as be a friend and a caring ear for when she chooses to give confidences.”

“I see.” The Duke nodded. He seemed impressed. “And what will you do for this…education?”

Alexandra stiffened. “I have decided on a broad curriculum, encompassing modern literature, French and German, as well as tapestry, art, and of course flowers.” That was, she reckoned, the appropriate sort of lesson.

“I see.”

Alexandra stiffened. He seemed amused, and she wondered what was making him smile so condescendingly.

“Your Grace?” she prompted.

“Art is born of observation and investigation of Nature,” he murmured, seemingly to himself.

“You needn’t quote Cicero like that,” she said, one brow lifting. “I think it does him little credit to mumble his words softly.”

“*You know* Cicero?” the Duke’s head jerked up. He looked interested.

Alexandra raised a brow still further. “I said to your household head in London that I am well educated. I trust it need not be pointed out that I meant I have a basic knowledge of literature, old and modern.”

“Yes, but…” the Duke countered. “I am sure the position does not require a thorough literacy in the old masters?”

Alexandra tried not to snort. “On what hooks must we hang modern literature, except on the workings of the old masters? How, pray, must I teach a subject like poetry, without reference to the works of the

ancient scholars?”

He stared.

“Upon my word,” he murmured. “I had not expected someone so… well…ready with her thoughts.”

Alexandra frowned. She wasn’t sure what to say about that. On the one hand, she felt a flare of pride. On the other hand, she wasn’t sure what he had been expecting. Surely, he wanted someone who could provide the best possible education for his sister? She also felt confused. Had she somehow made him reconsider because of her educated ways? She needed him to take her on!

“I trust that you were thinking of her education when you sought a companion?”

The Duke shrugged. “I suppose so. Her education, her comportment, and, above all, her protection. I am trusting you, Miss Ilfield. I hope you are aware of the trust I place in you as her chaperone?”

Alexandra nodded. “I am.” She looked up at him, wondering at the serious expression on his face. He surely trusted her to be of good character? The rudeness of the butler and the coldness of the servants towards her made his suspicion feel even worse. “I believe that, the longer I work here, the clearer it will become that I do not disrespect my position.”

The Duke raised a brow.

“I trust you don’t,” he said firmly. “Should I even suspect you took these matters lightly, you would not hold it for long. Good day, Miss.”

Alexandra stared as he stood and walked out of the room. She couldn’t believe it!

“What was that?” she murmured, watching him leave. He walked down the hallway and she listened until his footsteps were fading. “Why did he do that?”

She stood and went to the window, seeking peace. The schoolroom looked out on a lawned area, the green rectangle surrounded by hedges, still in sunshine. It all seemed small from up here, though she could guess the grounds of the estate were vast.

The house itself was extremely stylish and well-appointed; even here, the bookshelves were made of fine wood and the wide windows allowed light to enter. She had never seen such a graceful, refined home.

“It’s not all bad,” she told herself firmly, turning to go back to her room. “In fact, this is a fine place and you’re so lucky to be here.” She nodded.

She had escaped her home – which was the main object – and, not only that, she’d landed in a home where she could use her gifts, she was well-cared-for, and she even had books to read. The difficulties with the other staff and the fact that her room was drab and almost windowless were minor concerns.

And the fact, she thought mildly as she went up the stairs, that her employer was an oddity was something that would impact her little. It was his sister she was going to see every day, and he seemed to approve of her for that. She would see very little of him from now on, of that she was sure.

She was determined to enjoy herself here, and the Duke being difficult was not going to deter her from that goal.

Chapter 2

The fire was burning merrily in the grate in the study – a little over-merry since the butler looked flushed when he came in and rolled up his sleeves instantly. Matthew hardly noticed.

"What have I done now?" he murmured to himself.

He had expected someone educated, perhaps, when he received a chaperone into the house; he thought maybe she would be able to speak French, read music, and possibly would have read the modern authors – but the new chaperone was entirely different to what he had expected!

She would, he thought with a grin, be teaching his sister the classics, poetry and art, and probably enough for her to study Classics at Cambridge. It was, well…probably too much. He had wanted her to be able to have some basic knowledge so she could talk with people, that was it.

"I don't know what I think of this."

He rested his head in his hands. The impact of Miss Ilfield was strong. Her mind was sharp and funny, and he had, he confessed, enjoyed talking with her. But he didn't want her making his sister turn her back on society and lock herself away with her books! He worried about his sister and he took his job as guardian seriously.

And, he had to admit, Miss Ilfield was not displeasing as far as looks

went, either. He blushed and pushed the thought of her fine red lips, moist and welcoming, aside. She was most certainly not someone he could think of like that.

He reached for the Gazette as even the collection of gossip, speculation, and bad news it usually offered would be good to keep his mind off the problem of Miss Ilfield.

“Your Grace?” Mr. Denning said, coming in. Matthew looked up, frowning. Was it teatime already?

“Yes?”

“Your Grace, Lord Almerton is here. Should I send him to the anteroom?”

“No,” Matthew shook his head, shocked at the idea. “Show him in now, please. I will speak to him here at once.” He’d been so absorbed in interviewing the governess that he’d almost lost track of the fact that Albert was supposed to be arriving. He hadn’t remembered he was visiting.

“There you are!” Albert greeted, grinning at him as he came in. “Perdition take me! I thought you must be ill. You’re usually somewhere about.”

Matthew grinned. “I must admit I forgot about your visit. I was addressing some difficulties in the staff. If you’d like to go up? It’s good to see you.” He nodded to Albert, who smiled and followed him to the door.

Matthew looked the drawing room, wondering at the spindly wooden furniture. It was, apparently, made by a famous maker of furniture, even though he himself would have preferred something more solid. Arabella had insisted that it was all the rage, and he'd let her have her way, deferring to her greater knowledge of fashion

"Of course," Albert nodded. His brown eyes shone merrily. He was a thin fellow with a lively nature that matched his fiery red hair. He had been Matthew's best friend since university. They lived fairly close, too, Albert having his manor an hour away. "So," Albert said as they went into the drawing-room. "How are you and the household? I trust the difficulty's not serious?"

"Oh?" Matthew shrugged. He'd forgotten saying that. "No…just some new staff-member I wanted to interview. For Arabella. You know, one can't be too cautious."

"No," Albert nodded. "I must say, you do a fine job. Looking after your young sister by yourself cannot be easy, old fellow."

"No," Matthew agreed. "It isn't."

He had been Arabella's guardian since their parents' deaths when he was just fifteen or so. His sister had been five then, just a child. Now, he had been the Duke for nine years, and Arabella was almost ready to debut into society. He was desperate to look after her.

"London society is quite rough now," Albert observed, looking up thoughtfully.

“Rough? Well, I know what you mean, mind.”

It was rough for a sixteen-year-old girl.

Matthew tried not to worry for Arabella – he had a lot to think about today, and plenty to discuss with Albert. However, he found his mind returning to the chaperone and the problem – if he could call it a problem – of her being over-qualified for everything.

“Um, Albert,” he said after about an hour of holding his tongue. They had been talking about investing in rope, and he had missed most of Albert’s excited speech – he had been too busy thinking of his particular concern. “Would you say it would be a dangerous thing for Arabella to study the classics? And, well…other learned things?”

Albert gaped at him, and Matthew felt instantly foolish for having asked it. “Why, I think it would be a grand thing! Far from doing harm, it would broaden her mind and give her interests outside the Ton. It’s a lot easier to ignore all the criticism if you have something else to absorb you. Like, say, interest in economy! When I’m thinking about rope, or tea, or whatever else I want to invest my money in, I don’t care what Lady Amery thinks of my cravat, or if I’ll be allowed back into Almack’s this season.”

Matthew had to laugh. “You’re right, Albert. Thank you. I had not thought of it in that way before.”

“No trouble, ask me anything, at any time.” Albert beamed. “What I was asking you, though, is if you could put in just five percent into

this ship we're making? Just five. And the returns will be threefold! I feel certain."

"I'll think about it," Matthew promised.

Their talk turned to other things. Albert ran a hand down his face wearily.

"The crime in London is increasing, Matthew," he said. "I…well, I hesitate to walk abroad of an evening. And we don't live so far away, either."

Matthew nodded. "What about this new Watch? Aren't they supposed to keep the peace?"

"Yes," Albert agreed wearily. "But they're only men, too…there are so many thieves and footpads about! One can't be too careful."

"No," Matthew agreed, swallowing hard. He started to feel uncomfortable. He really didn't need Albert worrying him like this – he spent a good part of every day worried about his sister's safety anyway!

"And I heard the other day that…" Albert began.

"Now stop it, please, Albert," Matthew said swiftly. "Can't we talk about something more positive?"

“Oh! Of course, old chap. Have you seen the stocks in the tea-trade? So strong!”

Albert left after an hour – he had to settle some staffing problems of his own, he said, namely the hiring of a new cook for his hunting-estate. He rode off, leaving Matthew to find Arabella.

They met upstairs over tea.

“What do you think of her, brother?” Arabella asked.

“I think she will be a good companion for you,” Matthew said firmly. He felt his cheeks redden. He liked Miss Ilfield, he had to admit, but he wasn’t going to tell his sister. He couldn’t risk Miss Ilfield knowing he hadn’t disapproved of her easy conversation. He felt it was important to maintain distance with the staff.

“Isn’t she lovely?” Arabella grinned. “And she reminds me of you, a bit – so funny and clever.”

Matthew beamed.

“Thank you, Arabella,” he said. He found himself blushing. “Did you talk to her about the tea-party?” He had hoped to have a chaperone ready for Arabella’s first public event.

He found himself wondering what the chaperone thought of him.

“Oh! You mean the one you want me to go to? Oh, yes! She said I could wear the white muslin, if I liked, and she would be sure to check that I knew my etiquette. She joked about it, though. She’s so funny! I like her.”

“I trust she didn’t take it lightly,” Matthew asked, feeling worried once more. The chaperone was there to keep his sister safe, above all things, and he had to be sure of her character.

“Oh, brother! You don’t have to be so serious, do you?” Arabella asked. “But no. As it happens, she didn’t seem to scorn etiquette. Not a bit. So, you needn’t worry.” She reached for her teacup and poured more tea.

Matthew smiled. “I trust you, sister. Truly, I do.” He put aside his tea. “I know that you would never wittingly be rude or offensive. It’s not you I worry about – it’s everyone else.”

“Oh, brother. The whole of London isn’t full of scoundrels and rogues. Is it?”

Matthew shrugged. “I can’t say.” He swallowed his tea. He had to admit that, since becoming the only thing Arabella had approaching a parent, he’d become overly aware of the dangers of the world. He truly had started thinking of London as a pit of corruption, but she forced him to think rationally about it, and he found that it couldn’t be true. After all, he was also a Ton member, and he wouldn’t hurt anybody.

“I am so excited!” Arabella giggled. “Oh, brother! I can’t wait to wear my new dress. And Alexandra shall be there! Won’t it be fun?”

“Yes,” Matthew said, glad to have the subject changed. “Yes, it will be fun.”

He would, he decided, just have to keep a close eye on Miss Ilfield and make sure that she was not a bad influence for his sister. Arabella already trusted her, and that meant she must be even more responsible and reliable than he had thought.

Chapter 3

Alexandra sat down at the desk in the schoolroom. Though she knew her job was explicitly not as governess, she found that she gravitated to the room with its shelves of books and its airy brightness. It was the only place in the house, too, where she felt comfortable. In her own bedroom, she felt out-of-breath, and in the drawing-room she felt unwelcome.

She was surprised, as she sat there with her books, to find her mind drifting to the subject of Lord Blakely. How strange it was that he kept on returning to her thoughts again and again.

“Miss?” the maid said, coming to the door. Alexandra recognized her from dinner the previous evening – she’d been sitting across from her, eating soup – but she couldn’t yet recall her name. “The room should be empty at lunchtime…we’re going to be cleaning in here, and it’s best if you and your young charge aren’t in here then.”

“Thank you,” she nodded.

Chaperone was, she thought a little sadly as the maid curtseyed and turned to go out again, a difficult position to hold. She wasn’t a servant – or not in the same sense as those who cleaned the house or made the dinner – but at the same time, she was also not part of the family, however close and sisterly Arabella might seem to her.

“It’s just good to be safe,” she reminded herself.

She found herself thinking about him again, recalling the interchange of the initial interview. He had been so strict! And the way he'd talked, as though he half-expecting she would steal the crockery! She felt herself blush as she recalled the fact that, however tedious he was, he did have rather lovely soft brown hair.

"Alexandra! There you are!" Arabella said, walking lightly over to the desk. Alexandra hadn't even heard her footsteps in the corridor. She looked up as her young friend sat down.

"What is it, my Lady?" Alexandra asked. She studied Arabella's face – pale, but lit from within, her eyes sparkling.

"Nothing! I just wanted to find you. I was thinking about what you said yesterday, about knowing the *right way* to do something. I was confused, because sometimes there isn't a right way to do something. I mean, there's lots of ways to tie a bow, or lace a bodice, or…"

Alexandra grinned. "Yes, there are. I think that the only times there is 'a right way' is when it matters to do it in a way that people agree on doing it. With tasks you do by yourself, or for yourself, you should do them the way that's best for you."

She had to admit that she already liked Arabella as a pupil – her mind was lively and engaging, and she had a tendency to think thoroughly about topics. Her thoughts did wander a great deal, though, which made it hard to focus on any one thing.

"Oh!" Arabella clapped her hands. "Isn't that splendid! Now, I'm going to go out riding. You like riding? I love riding! I have a wonderful horse. Her name's Princess. You'd love her too. Would you like to meet her? But you can't wear that outside…it's too cold! Have you a

cloak?" Arabella was already on her feet, going to the windows.

"My Lady…" Alexandra said patiently. "Weren't we meant to be discussing modern writing?" She had made the agreement with Arabella the day before that they would spend an hour in the schoolroom every morning, after breakfast. Just an hour, she'd assured her young charge, and she seemed to have agreed to it – at least yesterday.

"Oh, that's *so boring*," Arabella flapped one hand. "I don't want to talk about modern writing. That's all silly stuff. I like riding!"

Alexandra felt her lip lift in a smile.

"Is it silly?" she asked. "Are you sure? What about Shelley? Is his writing boring and tedious?"

"Oh! No…" Arabella's mouth dropped into a small 'o' of shock. Alexandra grinned. Shelley – the famous poet – had clearly captured Arabella's imagination, just as he had most of the population of London and England – certainly, most of the female population.

"Well, then," Alexandra grinned. "Maybe poetry isn't always fun...but what about *Zastrozzi*?"

"Oh! His novel? I read it," Arabella said, flushing. "Matthew would be shocked."

“He would?” Alexandra was amused. Why would Shelley’s poetry be acceptable, but his novel – which, even Alexandra had to admit, was exciting and arresting rather than serious – was not? The Duke must be a strict person.

“Oh, yes! You won’t tell him, I’m sure. It was a fun book, though…I’m sure you liked it too.”

“I did,” Alexandra grinned. “Though I probably wouldn’t have told anybody that, either.”

They both chuckled. It would, they agreed, be their secret. They talked readily about literature. Arabella agreed that of all modern literature, Shelley was her favorite. She liked Byron, but she felt he could be a bit political, and politics was tiresome.

“It always makes people angry,” Arabella said, frowning.

“People feel strongly about how their country should be governed, which is understandable, I think,” Alexandra said gently.

“I suppose,” Arabella said. “But can’t we all agree on it? Surely all people want the same things?”

Alexandra smiled. “Now that, my dear friend, is a topic that philosophers have debated for centuries. We could reference Aristotle, or Socrates, or even the French school – Voltaire, for example – for our answers. Shall we have a look at what they said?”

“Yes,” Arabella agreed.

Alexandra reached for a piece of paper and something to write with, suddenly feeling familiar and comfortable.

“And so,” she was explaining after an hour, “I think that there is no general rule about ‘what everybody wants.’ Some suggest it’s knowledge, some material comforts, some a sense of purpose. I…do we have the windows open?” she asked, looking up as something moved.

“I opened the door,” Lord Blakeley said.

Alexandra stared as he walked in, striding across to the desk after shutting the door behind him.

“Oh!” Arabella jumped up. “Oh, brother! I didn’t know you were coming in! Alexandra and I were just having a diverting talk. And I want to go and try on my new dress, for the party. Will you stay?”

“I will,” he nodded. “Excuse me, Miss Ilfield. I couldn’t help interrupting. I was wondering if you had intended to discuss the reason for life?”

“No,” Alexandra countered, feeling nettled by his having been standing outside the schoolroom for some time. “I hadn’t. We were discussing what people want.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

Alexandra shook her head. “No…I wouldn’t have thought so. The purpose of life, and human endeavor…could they be the same thing? That itself asks many important questions.”

“It does,” Lord Blakeley countered. “Is my purpose here to do what I want? Probably not.”

Alexandra was surprised to see how bitter he looked. She frowned. The look was only there for a moment, and it was gone the instant Arabella laughed happily.

“I thought you were out! It’s grand to have you here.”

I also thought he was out, Alexandra thought gloomily. She had thought she’d heard his horse running. She had felt freer to talk when she had assumed he wouldn’t be there to listen; as somehow, she felt he didn’t hold with educated women.

Though he did agree that he wanted his sister educated. And he seems so serious sometimes…

“Sister, I’d be delighted to see your new dress, if you want to show me,” he said, turning to Arabella, who gazed up contentedly. “What I actually wanted to do was tell you some good news; I came to tell you we’d be receiving no guests. Do you want to dine upstairs?”

“Oh! Yes! That *would be* merry!” Arabella said. She looked up hopefully at her brother. “Brother…what about Alexandra? Is she welcome, too?”

Alexandra swallowed. The Duke looked as if someone had smacked him. She thought that he wouldn’t want her joining them, and that thought upset her.

“Is that what you’d like?” he asked. His voice was serious, his expression grave.

She raised a brow. “Is it what I’d like? Or is it part of my purpose here? I’m not sure. I myself see no reason why it should be contrary to my purpose here – these things are not always in dissonance.”

The Duke looked at her, amazed. She grinned. Making him think was rather fun.

“Hurray!” Arabella said, heedless of the interchange between her brother and her chaperone. “Shall you come up now, then, Alexandra?”

“It depends on what Miss Ilfield wants,” the Duke said again. He was looking so tense that, after a moment, Alexandra smiled.

“No, Lady Arabella. I will stay here. There’s work I must finish. I will dine downstairs with the others, later on.”

“Oh,” Arabella looked disappointed, and Alexandra felt a sharp pang of guilt. But, when she looked at the Duke, he was looking at her with a slightly-less severe eye than before. She’d made the right choice.

“Well, then,” she said, reaching for her quill, inspecting the end though it didn’t need trimming yet, she knew that. “I will see you after lunch, then, later. Then we can discuss the dress you talked about.”

“Hurray!” her young friend said, squeezing her hand impulsively before running to her brother.

Alexandra looked up at the Duke, who was standing in the doorway. He gazed back at her and she found it impossible to fathom the look he gave her as she left.

She could almost, she thought, think it was affection.

“Nonsense, Miss Ilfied,” she told herself firmly. “Why would he?”

She was his sister’s chaperone. He would certainly never look at her like that.

All the same, as she reached for a book and sat down in the chair by the window, she realized she was smiling. She couldn’t stop thinking about the Duke, and their exchange, and, despite how foolish it was, she had to admit that she rather liked him.

“No matter how peculiar and difficult he might be, or how silly it might be,” she told herself firmly.

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